

1 Corinthians 12:12–32

FruitFullNess – For the body

Today in our Fruit-FULL-ness series we've come to the most wonderful metaphor for the church. The church isn't a building, an organisation, or an hour on Sunday, the Church is the body of Christ.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12 v.27:

"Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

(1 Corinthians 12:27)

You might not have thought about yourself as a body part when you took your seat this morning, but today we're going to explore what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. At the most basic level it means: mutual dependence, mutual obligation, and mutual love.

–Mutual dependence

As we spoke about last week, 1 Corinthians was written to a divided church. It was growing in numbers, but also growing apart as factions formed around talented leaders.

Paul doesn't want to build factions or see people get hurt. So he does what Jesus would do – he takes a familiar concept and links it to the church. And what could be more familiar than our bodies!?

One reason he uses this analogy is because body parts depend on one another. Look at v.21:

"The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" (1 Corinthians 12:21)

If a part detached itself from the body it would die. A bodyless eye is useless. It needs the heart to pump blood, it needs the brain to decode, and it needs the hand to apply and do things.

Now at this point you may be thinking about ‘Thing’, the roaming hand from the Addams family. The reason this character is so effective is because it’s so bizarre. And yet we do this all the time in the church.

We say things like: “Oh you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian”. This sounds true but it’s a lie. We can’t disconnect ourselves from Christ’s body and think that our faith will survive.

We also sometimes disown other Christians and say things like: “Oh well I’m not that type of Christian”. Again, this is unhelpful because it divides the body of Christ and forgets about our mutual dependence.

The truth is we need each other. Like an eye needs a hand or a lung needs a heart. The body of Christ is diverse – we all have different Spiritual gifts. But the body of Christ is also unified – the sum-total of our gifts is what we need to function properly.

This is why Paul writes in v.26: *“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.”* (1 Corinthians 12:26)

When one of our number suffers, we all suffer.

I’ve had some knee problems over the last couple of months and it’s amazing how when my knee is sore I walk funny and hurt my back. I sleep funny so I hurt my neck, and then I get stressed, so I get cranky with my family. It all comes back to one body part hurting!

Friends, we can’t live without each other. When one of our number suffers, we all suffer and this is why we have mutual obligation in the church.

-Mutual obligation

This is what Paul is speaking about in v. 15:

“If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body.”

When this letter was written some Christians were saying, because I don't belong to this group, I'm not bound to other Christians in the church.

Often when the word 'church' is used in the Bible it applies to small communities of believers meeting in houses, but here Paul broadens our understanding of 'the church'.

In our baptism service we talk about the one holy catholic church, with a little 'c'. In this sense 'catholic' means universal and so we're talking about all denominations all over the world. If you meet another believer, they are your sister and brother in Christ, and you have the privilege of serving and supporting them as they are part of your body.

This again is why the analogy of the body is so helpful. All body parts serve and support one another which is why Paul writes in v.17:

"If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." (1 Corinthians 12:17-18)

Friends we have an obligation to other Christians not because we're all the same, but because by working with them we're taking part in God's redemptive work. This is why it's earth shattering that Paul says in v.13:

"For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Class divisions ran deep in Corinth so for Paul to write that the Jews and Greeks were one in Christ was bold. For him to say that slaves and free people had equal value and dignity before God was earth shattering. And yet this is what happens when we ask the Holy Spirit into our lives, when we drink of the One Spirit. We become a fellowship of broken people, the world over, each

seeking to serve the people around us because in doing so we build up the body of Christ.

Reading this verse during the week knocked me for six because since becoming a Christian, I've thought of salvation as a personal thing. For example, Ephesians 2:8 says:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—"

(Ephesians 2:8)

That 'you' there is plural. It's 'youse' have been saved and this is why v.10 goes onto say:

"we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."(Ephesians 2:10)

We are united in Christ and we were made by God for good.

In 1960 doctors were baffled by the health stats of a town in the United States called Rosetto in Pennsylvania. The people of this town enjoyed much better health than the towns around them - no Rostettan under 55 had heart disease. This was surprising because they didn't have better diets than people in other towns. They didn't exercise and smokers were everywhere. Their relatives living elsewhere didn't enjoy the same good health so it wasn't genetic.

In his book 'Outliers', Malcolm Gladwell writes of what researchers found in Rosetto:

"There was no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug addiction, and very little crime. They didn't have anyone on welfare. They didn't even have stomach ulcers. These people were dying of old age. That's it."

(As researchers) walked around the town, (they saw) how the Rosetans visited each other, stopping to chat with each other in the street, or cooking for each other in their backyards. They learned about the extended family clans that underlay the community. They saw how many homes had three generations

living under one roof, and how much respect grandparents had. They went to Mass at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church and saw the unifying and calming effect of the church. The ... town discouraged the wealthy from flaunting their success and helped the unsuccessful cover their failures.”

In the end experts could only put it down to ‘extended family’ and ‘community’. Ultimately this is what happens when Christians live to lift other up.

Friends, not only do we have a mutual need for each other, we also have a mutual obligation to care for one another, to lift each other up. Jesus calls us to this, because we function best as the body of Christ when we work together, lifting one another up. When Christian community works, it’s simply the most awesome thing in the world.

-Mutual love

Mutual obligation leads to love. A particular type of love. Look at v.22:

“those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty,”

(1 Corinthians 12:22–23)

Paul can see the dog-eat-dog culture of Corinth creeping into the church. So, he points out that some parts need to cover up and others deserve special honour.

No one should feel superior or inferior about their gifts. Some people have up-front gifts like leading and teaching, while others have ‘behind the scenes gifts’ like helping and serving.

No one should write off the contribution of another no matter how insignificant it may seem. The people who look after the grounds and polish the brass often exercise their gifts in private, but they

deserve just as much honour as someone up front. In love we treat everyone's gifts, including our own, as valuable to God.

And this is why Paul finishes with another list of gifts. Chapter 12 begins and ends with different lists of gifts. In v.27 we read:

“And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.”

(1 Corinthians 12:27)

There are eight gifts, similar but not identical to those listed in v.7-11.

This list is another reminder of the diversity of gifts. One gift listed here that doesn't appear elsewhere is administration. Where would our church be without administrators?!

And this is why Paul ends this section with a question and a command.

“Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?” (1 Corinthians 12:29)

We're not all the same, but we shouldn't want to be. It's our diversity that gives us strength.

So Paul commands us to:

“eagerly desire the greater gifts. And now I will show you the most excellent way.” (1 Corinthians 12:30)

This verse leads perfectly into 1 Corinthians 13, that famous poem about love which ends with these words:

“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:13)

If we don't exercise our gifts from a place of faith, hope, and love for God and others, they're useless.

So, friends let's let Christ shape the way we use our Spiritual gifts love. May we use our gifts to build up the body of Christ in a spirit of mutual dependence, obligation, and love.

I'd like to finish with the story of Saint Dallan. Dallan was an Irish monk who went blind in the middle of his life. This didn't faze him, and he used the gifts God gave him to write him, his most famous: "Be thou my vision" which ends:

*"High King of Heaven, my victory won,
May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heav'n's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all." (Saint Dallan)*