



JESUS: The Body
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
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We are closing up today a worship series in which we have learned from some of the identities of Jesus, who we often vaguely and limitingly describe as the reason for Christmas, or the miraculous resurrected Son of God. In trying to move beyond the image of his birth as a celebrated 6-pound, 8-ounce baby baby on Christmas day, and in trying to move from the fictional zombie-like Lord who has risen from the dead, we have looked at what it means to be a follower of Jesus while focusing on some of his assumed identities, such as Jesus the vagabond, the party person, the home-wrecker, and the Savior. Today, we will finish up with a focus on Jesus as the Body.

The physical body is a fascinating vessel. Our bodies come in all shapes, sizes, and with varying amounts of physical capabilities. As a child and as a youth, we often take for granted the capacity of our bodies. As a multi-sport athlete, I did a lot of damage to my body growing up – damage that I did not feel or have concern for at the time. I played basketball, soccer, baseball, and football. By the time I was a junior in high school, I had committed myself that I was going to attend a college where I could play on the football team. Such an opportunity had more to do with the limits of the college football team than it did the advanced level of my skills. Yet, I was, in every sense of the word, a jock. A smart jock, but a jock, none-the-less. (Does it say something that I have to classify that for you?)

Because of my desire to play college athletics, I dropped out of the band and picked up weight training as one of my high school electives. From August to December in the fall semester, from January to May in the spring semester, and then in June and July as part of the summer workout program, I spent an hour or two every day working toward being bigger, faster, and stronger. My dedication off the field made me better on the field. Being better on the field meant I could hit people harder, withstand harder hits, and when necessary, as my mother certainly preferred, I could run away faster from those who were trying to hit me.

When I was 17, immersed in a sports culture that necessitated physical dominance, I didn't worry about the repercussions of the hard work. At my coaches non-relinquishing demands, it was a no-pain-no-gain mentality. Now twice that age, I'm realizing that the temporary pain I experienced then, was not without its long-term effects. I stopped playing football after my freshman year of college, after 8 straight years of dedicated work on the gridiron. I later read a statistic that said the average college football player who plays from ninth grade through college, playing 8 total years, will graduate college at 22 with a body that has the physical deterioration of a normal 30 or 35-year old, largely due to the hits and stress the body has been put through.

Football is by no means the only stressor to cause premature aches and pains in the human body. It is but one of many activities that can advance the aging of the body. But as I age, and as the pains take longer to subside, as the knees remain sorer longer after a run, as it becomes harder to keep off the holiday pounds, I have started to understand why the body receives such negative attention. In every age throughout time, there have been philosophical and religious groups that are built around the frailty of the body.

The idea of reincarnation has long been a central idea in the Indian religions of Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism. Reincarnation claims that your body is a temporary vessel that does not define you, but that at the physical death of your bodily vessel, you will take on new life in a new place in a new physical body. The idea of reincarnation encourages a lack of support for the body, as your body provides little more than a temporary residence for your soul.

“Greek philosophy (that is, Ancient Greek religion after Plato), is obsessed with how to get over the body. [It asks,] how can we – through philosophical meditation on higher things – rise above this frail, dirty, decaying flesh and into some sweetly disembodied eternity?”¹ Meditation is but one alternative that promises to move your mind beyond the limitations of the body to focus on the eternal. In 2012, Americans spent over \$30 billion dollars on complementary health approaches to move beyond the body’s limitations, which includes herbal supplements, meditation, and yoga.

From a religious perspective, you find supportive teachings for this mentality in Mary Baker Eddy, whose writings inspired the foundation of Christian Science. Having attended a testimony service at a Christian Science church in DC, I was astonished as people told stories of how they had cut themselves, how they had fallen, or how they had been sick – but that in refocusing on Christ they were able to push the idea of these physical ailments away and proclaimed their pain or physical abrasions were nothing more than a false persuasion of Satan. They believed that any such pain, cut, hurt, or limitation was not a physical reality, but a false lure by evil to turn from the wholeness of Christ.

It’s interesting that with so many groups and people, both historically and even still today, trying to escape the frailty of the human body, that when God decides to send Jesus as the saving work in the world, when God offers the tangible demonstration of his love in the world, God chooses to send Jesus in the form of the human body. God uses a vessel that is regarded as unholy by many to represent the most holy.

Even after the resurrection – even after God’s saving work is completed through the death and resurrection of Jesus – Jesus doesn’t avoid the human body in his resurrected form. Jesus shows up after the tomb in a resurrected body. It wasn’t a ghostly figure, it wasn’t a spirit creature ... ask the doubting Thomas, he put his fingers in the holes in Jesus’ hand. Jesus comes back in a tangible body. As a vagabond, Jesus gave legitimacy to the outcast and despised, with whom he spent much of his time. As a Savior, Christ reconciled the outcast and despised to God and the community. In his assuming a physical body, Christ did much the same thing, offering a new importance to the body.

But perhaps it doesn't take God sending Christ in human form for us to know the importance of the human body. Even as much as we reject it for its frailty and the times it has failed us, I would imagine that you and I have each experienced similar times when we realized the importance of the human body. Think about this: when you are experiencing great emotional pain because of work problems or relationship issues, what do you long for most? Many times, it is to be in the arms of a loved one. When a mother or father dies, there is very little to offer a substitute for the comfort of sharing in the embrace of a family member. If you or someone you know has lost a child, you know, there is no mental image that offers an acceptable replacement for the loss of the physical child who you brought into this world. More times than not, when we are experiencing great heartache, there are no words that will bring comfort or peace. What matters most is the presence of the physical body.

Jesus' life demonstrated the power of the physical body. Even before he had the capability to speak, just his physical presence was seen as a threat to the Roman empire. Herod sent to have him killed as an infant, because of the fear of his mere physical presence. ... When the hemorrhaging woman saw no other way to find healing, and pushed through the crowds to receive healing from Jesus, it wasn't his words that brought her new life; it was Jesus' mere presence and a simple physical touch that healed her. ... It wasn't Jesus' words that attracted the hapless, helpless, and hurting multitudes, it was Jesus – it was his physical presence that brought the multitudes together.

And this physical presence of God in flesh, this partying and wandering Savior in taking on human form, taught and gave the example for the church. In the teaching and witness of Christ, God offered the greatest witness of how the church was to exist. In the resurrected body, Christ gave birth to the church, and the church was invited to take on the role of being the body of Christ for the world. Paul makes this clear in our text this morning.

Paul speaks a great deal about 'the body' in verses 12 through 26, which we'll come back to in a moment, but if we jump down to verse 27, it is made very clear as Paul writes, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." In the departure of the physical representation of Christ in the world, the church becomes the physical representation of God for the world.

The church becoming the body of Christ for the world is made very apparent in Acts 9. Jesus, in resurrected form, meets Saul (who will become Paul) on the Damascus Road. We read beginning in verse 1, "Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way (that is, people following Christ's teachings), men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed round him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' [Saul asked,] 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, who you are persecuting.'"

Jesus asks Saul, why are you persecuting me? Saul's probably thinking, what are you talking about? I don't know you; I don't even believe in you. I'm persecuting those who say you are

real, who are violating Scripture by their customs and their diets. But Christ will not hear it. In the eyes of the risen Christ, if you mess with the members of the church, you are attacking Christ's very own body.ⁱⁱ It just reinforces Christ's teaching when he calls together the disciples, saying to them, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me."ⁱⁱⁱ The church, made up of its many members, has become the physical representation of God in the world. The love of God, once witnessed in the physical body of Jesus Christ, is now manifested by Jesus Christ as the living God in *us*.

So if Christ was the body, who came to show us God's love in a physical being, for us to be faithful in fulfilling the role of the body, we have to ask, why does the body exist, and what does that body look like when lived faithfully?

First, why was Jesus sent in the human body – why a body? God sent Christ in the form of a body "because abstract, general truth does not stir much among us. When truth becomes embodied, up close and personal, present truth, then truth becomes interesting and we know for sure the 'the kingdom of God has come near.'"

Just consider the resurrection and the Easter morning encounter at the tomb. Come Easter morning, it wasn't the empty tomb that led people to believe in the resurrected Jesus. The disciples thought Jesus' body had been stolen by grave robbers. "Rather it was Jesus' return to them, his presence with them, his undeniable intimacy with them in bread and wine, in sermons and acts of love and mercy, that led them to fling in the face of the world's objections that the crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead."^{iv}

And finally, as Christ is the representative body of God in the world, and in his resurrection, Jesus passed the metaphorical baton in the creation of the church, instilling his presence in the church, calling the church the body through which God would be made manifest in the world, defining the church as the body through which Christ will be uniquely present in this world, what does our faithfully being the body look like?

Paul defines such a faithful representation in his articulation of the body in our passage from 1 Corinthians 12. For Paul, the model of the body to define the community is not a simple metaphor, it's a faithful description of how the community of faith, the church, should look if it is to be a faithful physical representation of Christ in the world.

The first argument Paul makes is that the church must be diverse. "The necessity of diversity within the body is a presupposition for Paul and is therefore not something that he 'will argue for but argue from.' The body of Christ is and needs to be diverse."^v He uses these absurd visuals to make his point: "If the full body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" ... His argument brings to mind cartoonish characters from bad science fiction films. But that's not the way it is. There are many members of the body, and each is necessary for the body's faithful representation of Christ in the world.

His second argument is that every part of the body is a necessity. We often fail in the church to affirm the importance of each person. We tend to reward those who have certain gifts, or more appreciated gifts. “Rewarding those who have exercised their gifts, we imply that this is something special, above and beyond the call of duty, and that the only valuable ministries are those that receive public thanks.”^{vi} I often wonder as I look at the names printed on the plaques around the church, for each plaque that names someone who had the financial gifts to earn their spot on the plaque or the window, over the past 170 years, how many other folks served this church faithfully with gifts that were unappreciated or under appreciated? Paul says every person in the church matters, and the gifts of each person matter. “[Such a claim] has less to do with equality than with wholeness. Only with all of our members can the body of the church be whole.”^{vii}

And this is the final call of Paul – the body must be whole. Think about your body for a moment. When one part of your body is hurting, does it not affect the full body? “Everyone knows how a pain in the ankle or finger can absorb the entire body’s energy and attention. That, Paul contends, is how things are in the church.”^{viii} The members of the church, those whose talents are public, and those whose talents are private; the members of the church, those with great wealth, and those with little wealth; the members of the church, those who are present in worship each week, and those who are only present once in a while; the members of the church, those who have been around for decades, and those who have been around for only a few weeks; the members of the church, those who can walk to church, and those who drive in from surrounding neighborhoods; the members of the church, those who are working, and those who are not; the members of the church, those who own houses, and those who rent or have no house; the members of the church, all together, are given the responsibility to care for one another, to encourage the gifts of one another, to support one another, to respect one another, and to share in joy and pain with one another.

This is the call of Paul, and the faithful witness of the church as the body of Christ for the world. We live and share together as a great expression of God’s love for one another, and as a visible witness of God’s love for the world, because we are following in the teaching and witness of Jesus, who gives us the example of being the Body. So may we rejoice and mourn, live and love, work and wonder together as a faithful witness to God’s love in the world as the Body of Christ. Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon. *Why Jesus?* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 10:40. NRSV.

^{iv} Willimon.

^v Troy Miller. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 1.* Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

^{vi} Raewynne J. Whiteley. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year C, Volume 1.* Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011.