



Community with God
1 Corinthians 12:14-26
Rev. Thomas G. James
Washington Street UMC
August 20, 2023

That is our focus this summer – the *Arc of the Universe* – as we look at the Biblical text from a 10,000-foot view, identifying the common threads of God’s work for, with, and among creation present throughout the Biblical witness. From creation to Revelation, we are looking at how God creates intimacy with humanity, and how despite our best efforts to turn away from God, God always finds a way to rescue us to further the will of the divine among creation. Intimacy with God; distanced from God; rescued by God. This is the narrative thread of the Biblical text, on repeat.

Last week, Kim focused on God’s ultimate rescue in the form of Jesus Christ. Having tried judges, kings, and prophets ... having provided covenant and commandment ... having tried forced exile and divine emancipation, God determined to do for us what we could not seem to manage to do for ourselves: to provide the ultimate liberation from the lure and weight of sin. In Jesus Christ, God offered the final rescue, overcoming the power of death with the glory of resurrection and new life.

But God is not imperceptive to human suffering and desire. Though Christ’s resurrection ensures salvation for the created humanity, *God’s desire is not that we must wait for the consummation of creation to enjoy the fruit of our salvation*. Even the Psalmist cried out, “restore unto me the joy of my salvation and renew a right Spirit within me.” God doesn’t demand we wait for the eschaton – the final and full revelation of the Kingdom of God – to enjoy the sweetness of the salvation that has been secured for us in Christ. Instead of having to wait, God sends the Spirit to lead us and guide us that we may enjoy the fruits of salvation in the midst of a creation that is still being molded toward the eternal vision God divines.

From the Acts of the Apostles through the Epistle letters, we are given witness of how the Spirit calls us to greater faithfulness as a people of God. The Spirit continues to this day to call us to faithfulness so that we may live into the witness of God’s divine will for creation. With the gifting of the Spirit, we are once again connected to God with intimacy, as the Spirit breathes life into our very being – only now, instead of being given breath as humanity (which God gave in the creation story of Genesis), the God now breathes into us through the Holy Spirit a new identity as a collective people, as the Ekklesia – as the church.

The Epistle letters, which are effectively sermons to the early churches formed around the Mediterranean Sea, are offered around the three-fold pattern that we’ve seen present since Genesis: intimacy with God, distanced from God, rescued by God. The letters frame the intimacy of God as the Spirit’s work on our behalf, gifting us identity as the body of Christ. They frame our distance from God by identifying the ways in which our actions go against the will of God. And they name our being rescued by God by stating how the Spirit works among us to reel us back in to our collective identity. Perhaps no part of the Epistle letters better encompasses this three-fold pattern than our text in 1 Corinthians 12.

In the lead up to our passage, which begins in verse 14, Paul indicates the formation of our identity as a body is the work of the Spirit. Verse 13 reads, “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” The body that Paul fleshes out in verses 14-26 comes into existence by our unity in the Spirit. It is God, in the person of the Spirit, that creates the body.

The text that follows is intentionally humorous. Paul is using the literary method of hyperbole to define our identity as a people. “Initially the parts of the body speak for themselves. The foot ridiculously declares it does not belong to the body because it is not a hand; the ear similarly states it does not belong to the body because it is not an eye.”ⁱ Paul then ramps up the image to a further ridiculous image, declaring that the body could not be one giant eye, because then where would it have a sense of smell.

Perhaps I’m alone in this, but as I read this text, what comes to mind is Mr and Mrs Potato Head. Maybe you still have one at home, or at minimum can remember playing with these as younger versions of yourselves. While any potato made to look like a person (with ears and eyes, a nose and a mouth) is ridiculous in and of itself, everyone who’s ever played with a Potato Head has put the ear in the mouth hole, and the eye in the ear hole, and probably left the nose off altogether. It doesn’t take much work to turn an already funny looking toy into a joke of itself by rearranging the body parts.

The beauty of the toy is that, even the youngest of children know where the eyes go, where the ears go, and where the mouth goes. Every part has a designated place, and any differentiation of that order makes the face a laughing matter.

This is Paul’s point in this text. It is comical to think of the human body as being all eye or all ear. Any image of the body that doesn’t include a head with eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth, or a body that doesn’t include arms and legs, for Paul was an incomplete body. Perhaps Paul was being an ableist, and cancel culture today may try to refute his imagery, but Paul was writing to a First Century congregation who would have fully understood his imagery without rebuffing his definition of the body.

Paul has a specific purpose in using the imagery of the human body to define the church – or the community of Christian believers. The human body is one of the most complex systems known on Earth. Biologists, anatomists, and doctors can study the human body as much as they want, there are still things we just don’t understand about the complex interconnectedness of the many systems that make up the human body. Yet, for all we don’t fully understand, we do know that every organ, muscle, bone, blood cell, and nerve serve a purpose. Together, the full collection of body parts creates a living, breathing, and changing entity. Every part serves a different purpose, but no individual part exists outside of its connection to the whole.

Paul believes that the human body was created in this complex way by God back in the beginning. Just as God breathed life into this complex entity in creation, so too God breathed life in the community of faith through the Spirit at Pentecost. And, like the human body, the community of faith is a similarly complex body. While we may not understand how every part functions, every part is just as important as the next.

For Paul, our unity is what gives meaning to our diversity – *not* the other way around. That is, the goal of the church is not to create a diverse community that is lacking in unity. This method of creating diversity for diversity sake is actually quite the opposite of Paul’s exhortation. What Paul is saying is that God, through the gifted Spirit, has already created us as a people with unity – we have already been made into the Body of Christ (a singular entity that represents God in the world). Our unity was secured in our foundation.

So, Paul says, because our unity already exists – because we are already one body – we must accept that *our diversity is a necessary component of our unity*.

After using this comical metaphor to name the necessity of our diversity amidst our unity, Paul then shifts into criticizing what seems to have become a problem in the Corinthian church. After naming the intimacy with God as the Spirit-breathed body of Christ, Paul names how members of the faith community were distancing themselves from God.

Paul writes, “The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this.”

This kind of directed statement is common in Paul’s writings. In the midst of making a broad theological statement about our identity and purpose as God’s people, Paul makes a not-so-broad statement about something that is amiss in how we are living out that identity and purpose. Here, Paul is criticizing the difference in the way the community is treating the “more respectable members,” compared to how they are treating the “weaker” and “less honorable” members.

After naming the problem, which is the mistreatment of the “lesser” members, Paul states how God is rescuing us from this perverse posture. “God,” Paul writes, “has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.”

Because the normal human-societal posture is to hail the “greater” members, God has intentionally focused on lifting up the “lower” members so that all members might be treated equitably.

Again, our focus this summer is not specific to any individual texts, but to see the greater arc of God’s will in the full narrative of the Biblical storyline. If you were to skim through the whole of the Biblical scripture, you will find God quite insistent on caring for the “lower” members with regularity. You will find over 100 examples of God’s plea for the people to care for the *widows* of the community – a group that was, according to the societal structure of the time without financial or familial security. You’ll find another 50 or more examples of the scriptures calling for the community to take care of the *orphans* – another group left without familial security or protection. You’ll find over 200 examples of the scripture speaking of the *poor*, or the “*financially insecure*,” with instructions of how the faith community is to provide them care. You’ll find more than 50 passages instructing the community to care for *immigrants* – those who have relocated into your community from afar, who, again because of societal norms, do not have financial or familial security in their new home.

If you focus in on just the Gospel texts, you'll find Jesus continuing this pattern of lifting up those who are outcast, while at the same time humbling those who are revered. Jesus is often found criticizing or correcting the temple leaders, while at the same time making intentional visits to the homes of tax collectors and others deemed "sinners." Jesus, in both his teaching and lived witness, gives preference to those excluded from the inner circles of power and prestige.

This pattern of teaching, insisting upon, and working toward equity is part of the common thread throughout the Biblical text. And Paul is one again reemphasizing it here in 1 Corinthians 12.

Scholar Kimlyn Bender notes, "For Paul, this [call to equity] is not because of some modern notion of insipid egalitarianism but because of God's divine determination that gives dignity to all members in their different placement and gifts."ⁱⁱ Bender continues, echoing Paul's closing exhortation, "The end result should be a community characterized by mutual concern and care for one another in which the sorrows and joys of each member are borne and shared by the many."

Scholar Richard Hays reiterates this final thought, writing, "[Paul] envisions not just the tolerance of differences within the community but a gracious and compassionate synergy in which all the members share one another's sorrows and joys."ⁱⁱⁱ

This final call to suffer and rejoice together once again connects with the string of the arc that continues God's desire for a community that is unified and working for one accord.

The scripture, both here in 1 Corinthians 12, as well as throughout the Biblical witness, continues to call us to seek the welfare – the wellbeing – the shalom of the community at large. The Divine focus on communal sharing stands in stark contrast to the vapid individualism and tiring cries for personal liberties that echo from American churches. The common thread of God's divine work continually pulls us back to the body, where we share in community "a gracious and compassionate synergy,"^{iv} sharing the depths of each other sorrows, and celebrating the heights of each other's joys.

In this collaborative focus, we are joined more fully to God and one another through community. It was this vision of community God had for humanity at creation, and as we will see again next week, it is this vision of community God maintains for us in consummation.

We are first and foremost one body, and then, we are members of it. The body does not consist of one member, but of many. Let us rejoice in God's divine plan, and commit ourselves to sharing more fully in the joyous community God has formed, that we might live and love as God has given us the ability to do through the power of the Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Charles L. Campbell. *1 Corinthians: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Kimlyn J Bender. *1 Corinthians: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard B. Hays. *First Corinthians: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. 2011.

^{iv} Hays.