

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

February 11, 2018, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Life-Changing Relationships

1 Corinthians 12:12-13:3

I. Introduction:

A. Returning soldiers display our lack of life-changing relationships

Good morning friends. I'm continuing to praise God for our time with Dr. Perkins last Sunday! Wasn't that incredible? If you missed it, do yourself a favor and go to nwchurch.org and watch Dr. Perkins' message. Even if you were here, go watch it again, it was that good.

In fact, Pastor Dave found Dr. Perkins' message so powerful he skipped town. He said it was to "go camping", which I consider code for "I'm not preaching after Dr. Perkins." I'm just kidding, of course ☺, it's been planned for a while that I'd be preaching today on life-changing relationships. And I'm looking forward to us also celebrating the Lord's Supper today and hearing from Christopher and Allison Pailes later in the service, so let's ask God to work...

I recently read a tough magazine feature about veterans dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The author talked with a variety of experts to investigate why our military, despite spending billions on treatment, now has the highest rate of post-traumatic stress disorder in its history. According to the article, only about 10% of our armed forces see combat, yet half of our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have applied for permanent disability, 15% diagnosed with PTSD.

Now the relationship between long-term trauma and combat is complicated, and I am no expert. But research shows that recovery from war is really influenced by the society the soldiers return to. And the article was making the point that sadly, our society is not a good place for our soldiers to return.

The *Journal of Affective Disorders* concluded a study on our soldiers returning home by describing our society as, "overfed, malnourished, sedentary, sunlight-deficient, sleep-deprived, competitive, inequitable, and socially-isolating environment with dire consequences."

Some veterans report that they even find themselves missing war, because it was finally an experience of human closeness. Think of a combat platoon - eating together, sleeping together, laughing together, relying on each other for support and defense, sharing a common mission and identity, sacrificing for each other.

And then after that closeness, our veterans return here where, “most people work outside the home, children are educated by strangers, families are isolated from wider communities, personal gain almost completely eclipses collective good, and people sleep alone or with a partner.” One anthropologist interviewed went so far as to describe our society as “anti-human.”¹

B. How can life-changing relationships happen?

Our veterans face unique challenges, and we want to support them and honor their sacrificial service, but they are certainly not the only ones in our society who long for something more in relationships.

Even in the church family our relationships can be a struggle, for we often live in similarly isolating ways as everyone else around us. In a society like ours, one can wonder, how can life-changing relationships happen? Perhaps they’re only really possible in tragic situations like war, where we’re forced to live closely together to survive. As we consider that question, if you’ve got a Bible, open to the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 12

C. Corinthians struggled with relationships

As you’re turning, let me give you some context. 1 Corinthians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church in the ancient city of Corinth, a church with relationship problems. They couldn’t agree on which leader to follow, they failed to address major sin issues, they mistreated each other when they gathered to worship, there were lawsuits, some thought their spiritual gifts made them more important and self-sufficient, and so on. This church needed guidance on relationships, and the Bible provides it in chapter 12.

II. Secure community (1 Cor 12:12-16)

A. The church is the body of Christ

And we can apply these timeless truths here at Northwest. Part of our church vision’s is to passionately pursue life-changing relationships with God, each other, and our world. So let’s see what we can learn here in 1 Corinthians 12. Please follow along as I read, starting in verse 12. **(12-16)**

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not

¹ <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/05/ptsd-war-home-sebastian-junger>, accessed online 2/7/18. Quoted portions come straight from the article.

made up of one part but of many. ¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

In these verses Paul describes the church as the body of Christ. God designed both the human body and the body of Christ, and God’s design of the human body shows how we should function as Christ’s body. In verses 12 and 13 Paul notes that just as the parts of a physical body form one body, so every believer is part of the body of Christ.

And as Paul shows in verse 13, our unity in Jesus overcomes the ways the world categorizes people, like Jews and Gentiles. To put it in modern terms, whatever our races, nationalities, income levels, politics, theological distinctives, sports teams, spiritual gifts, we, the believers of Northwest, all belong to Jesus and each other. As Paul says in verses 15 and 16, one part can’t say that it is no longer part of the body just because it’s different.

B. We all belong to Jesus and each other

I bet we’ve all experienced feeling like we don’t belong somewhere, but when it comes to the church, we all belong, there are no spiritual orphans in God’s family. No matter our differences, or conflicts, or how disconnected you might feel, God’s Word powerfully reminds us here that we all belong to Jesus and each other. Isn’t that incredible? As verse 13 says, the Spirit of God Himself has united us with Jesus and one another. We’re just as united as the parts of a physical body, we all belong.

So let’s live like it, helping each other experience the secure community we already possess in Jesus. For without this sense of belonging, we’ll never experience life-changing relationships.

Now 1 Corinthians is written to a church, so it’s describing relationships among Christians. But if you’re here this morning and do not believe in Jesus, we are so glad that you’re here too. You’re very welcome to join a small group, where we talk about the Bible and pray and encourage each other. We’d be enriched by your abilities and perspective. Or join us in serving our community, pack some grocery sacks or teach an English as a second language class, there are ways for all to engage.

III. Serving Christ’s cause (1 Cor 12:17-24a)

A. We all need each other to grow in God

And God does not only create in the church a community where we all belong, but where we all need each other because of the diversity of gifts God gives us. Please follow along as I read, starting in verse 17. **(17-20)**

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? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

Paul continues to compare the body of Christ to a human body. As the eye is enriched by the ear, so we are enriched by the diversity of gifts in Christ's body. When you read passages in the New Testament about spiritual growth, they are almost never about an individual Christian growing. Rather, the Bible describes Christ's church growing together.

For much of the growth happens as we gather together to sing songs of praise, to pray, to share the Lord's Supper, to confess our sins and seek help and be reminded that Jesus removed all our sins, to encourage each other, to bear one another's burdens, to engage with God's Word, to serve the world around us, to have baptisms and hear stories of God's work, to apologize and forgive, to exercise our gifts to bless each other.

Like the parts of a human body, we all have functions and need each other. God's Spirit works in you in ways that I need, that we all need. And notice, as verse 18 says, God does not haphazardly arrange the members of the church. He places every part of Christ's body just where He wants us to be. So there is no room for thinking, well, my gift doesn't matter, or I only serve in this way.

You have been placed at Northwest by God Himself to build up Christ's body and our world. So if you are on the sideline, we need you and our world needs you in the game. And if you're not sure where to serve, I'd be glad to talk with you, or go to our website, nwchurch.org - it has a "Serve" heading with service ideas and contact information.

Now let's look at verse 21, where God's Word shows not only that we need you, but that you need your church family. **(21-24a)**

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!" ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And

the parts that are unrepresentable are treated with special modesty,²⁴ while our representable parts need no special treatment.

As the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you." so you can't say that you don't need Christ's body here at Northwest. Paul asserts this point in verse 22, saying that even the parts of Christ's body that seem to be weaker are actually indispensable. So let's value each other in this way, seeing that Christ designed the fellow members of His body to help complete what is lacking in you and your relationship with God.

B. Lewis illustration shows we need each other to grow in God

I've heard Pastor Tim Keller show our need for God's people with an illustration from C.S. Lewis' book, *The Four Loves*. C.S. Lewis was part of the Inklings, a group of Christian authors who got together to critique each other's writings and talk about life and God. Two of Lewis' closest friends in the group were Charles Williams and J. R. R. Tolkien. Sadly, Charles Williams passed away. When Williams died, Lewis thought that at least he would get to enjoy more of the older Tolkien, now that he didn't have to share him with Williams. But to Lewis' disappointment, he actually experienced less of Tolkien. For Williams' personality and humor brought out things in Tolkien that C.S. Lewis did not. Lewis realized that it took their whole group of friends to really know Tolkien; Lewis by himself was not enough.

And Lewis observes that if this is true of a mere man, how much more true is it of God. You can't really explore the riches of knowing God unless you really know Christ's body. Edified by our differing spiritual gifts, personalities, backgrounds, cultures, testimonies. As C.S. Lewis said it, "For every soul, seeing Him [God] in her own way, communicates that unique vision to all the rest... The more we thus share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall all have."²

You cannot know God well or live out His will by yourself. As one of my seminary professors said it, "You're doing spiritual growth wrong if you're trying to do it on your own."

Now I know some are hesitant to open themselves up to Christ's body. I've talked with believers who have suffered horrible wounds from their family or a church. Sometimes, for the sake of your well-being, you need to separate yourself from those damaging relationships.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 62.

But then you can be tempted to never open yourself up to another church family again. It's a very understandable temptation when you have deep hurts and compelling reasons not to open up. I get that, my deepest wounds have come from church people.

But the only people I've seen overcome major trauma are the ones who open themselves back up to real relationship. I'm not saying you should open up fully with everyone or that you won't experience more hurt, we all will. But this passage reminds us that we can't grow ourselves to maturity in Jesus, that we can't do life alone, practically amputated from Christ's body. For Jesus works through His body to bring the healing and growth that we need and that we can then pass on to others. It's up to you to decide how long before you pursue that blessing.

C. We all must serve, not consume

May God help us all engage with Christ's body, and as we do, let's watch out for selfishness. We all have selfish tendencies, and we live in a consumer culture that encourages us to ask questions like "what's in it for me?" So we can be tempted to value Christ's body only to the extent it meets our needs. Coming to consume, rather than serve. I still struggle with "what's in it for me" even as a pastor. And as I look back at my early years in the church, I'm embarrassed by just how much I focused on me.

I came on Sunday morning only if I felt like it, giving no thought to how it might impact others if I wasn't there. And on the weeks that I came, I wasn't concerned about preparing my heart to worship and to love people. I definitely wasn't getting to bed at a good time on Saturday so that I could wake up early enough to pray before we gathered. I didn't even try to be on time, giving no thought to how it might make the worship team feel as I always came in late. I didn't think about serving my church family or the world unless it was really convenient and interesting. And afterwards I assessed the morning by whether or not I was moved by the worship set, how much I got out of the sermon, and if others had encouraged me.

I lost sight of the fact that I was one member of that living body of Christ. That the church can't be all about my needs any more than my physical body can be all about the needs of one finger.

Pastor Shane Hipps describes this tendency to make church about me, saying, "In this thoroughly modern, consumer-driven setting, church and community are valued, but only as they strengthen a Christian's personal relationship with Jesus. In this sense, community is little more than a tool. It is viewed simply as a tactical support mechanism for helping individuals to better

pursue their own private faiths. This is in stark contrast to the biblical vision of the church in which individuals exist for the sake of the community and the community exists for God's mission in the world."³

Thank God that other believers at my first church cared more about the body of Christ, it would have been sickly and then died if all shared my selfishness. And thank God that Jesus paid the penalty for all my selfishness. And I also thank God that so many of you faithfully use your gifts to bless this body of Christ and our world. For without your servant's hearts, we can never be a true community or experience the meaning that comes from serving Christ's mission in our world.

And to be clear, I hope everyone here is also receiving, that you're benefitting from our worship through song, the preaching, our groups, our ministries, your relationships here, and so on. Life-changing relationships include receiving, the problem is when our focus is just on "What's in it for me?". The problem is when we're preoccupied with whether we are receiving enough back for the ways we're investing here.

Things only become life-changing as we're thinking less about what we're getting, and more about partnering with Jesus and His body to build something great in our church family and world. Without those servant's hearts, we will never experience life-changing relationships with God, each other, and our world.

IV. All in love (1 Cor 12:24b-31)

A. The most excellent way

It's why Paul calls the whole church not only to be engaged, but engaged with love.

Let's look now, starting in the middle of verse 24. **(24b-27)**

But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it,²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

In a healthy human body, the members work together for the common good of the body. As verses 25 and 26 say, so we are to have concern for our fellow members in Christ's body. To lovingly care for one another in the ups and downs of life. If you've been in a place of desperate need and experienced the body of Christ meeting that need, you know how meaningful that

³ Shane Hipps, *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture*, 100.

loving service is. So may we serve each other and our world in love, for as Paul reminds us again in verse 27, we together are the body of Christ.

In verses 28-30 Paul discusses spiritual gifts, which he also covered at the beginning of chapter 12. I find it interesting that after discussing Christ's body and serving others with our gifts, in chapter 13 Paul pens his famous passage on love. The one that says "love is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast" and so on. It is often read at weddings, which is good, but Paul addressed it to the whole church.

There are two other Bible passages where Paul discusses spiritual gifts and the body of Christ, Romans chapter 12 and Ephesians chapter 4. And in both those passages, Paul also brings up love right afterwards, like he does here. It's like love in the church must be really important or something.

Now look at the second half verse 31 with me. It says, "And yet I will show you the most excellent way." That most excellent way, which Paul describes in chapter 13, is love. The heading in my Bible for that section is *Love is Indispensable*. I like that, love is indispensable for life-changing relationships, it is the most excellent way.

B. Jeff's experience in church shows the importance of community, cause, and love

So I started going to church in high school, about 20 years ago. Then I went off to college and engaged with a second church. Then eventually I moved to Dallas for work and seminary and engaged with another church, and then after seminary I came here to serve at Northwest.

In my early years in church, when I was so focused on myself, my spiritual growth was pretty slow. Over time, I got involved in a small group, and my walk with God went to a new level with community. And then I started using the spiritual gifts God gave me to serve, and my spiritual growth continued to increase.

Now when I first got engaged in community and service, my focus will still mostly on me. I was mostly in relationships so that other people could pour into me and I was serving at first only in ways I was excited about. Yet God still graciously blessed those steps. I grew spiritually as some more mature Christians poured their lives into me and as I started to serve. It was a fine start. We're all at different points in our spiritual journey, and wherever you are this morning, I'm glad you're here and hope you'll take a "next step" towards life-changing relationships.

Personally, I found that as long as church was mostly about others pouring into me, and as long as my service was conditional on me enjoying it and it fitting my schedule, things were better, but I was not yet at life-changing relationships.

It was only as I started living, only sometimes and never perfectly, in the most excellent way of love that I experienced life-changing relationships. It was not enough for others to give to me, I needed to give myself in relationships, Christ's love flowing to the people around me, even when they weren't meeting my needs. That I had to commit to serving the church family and community even when it was difficult. I'm far from it, but I'm talking about moving closer to the kind of love we saw embodied by Dr. Perkins last Sunday.

In my 20 years in church, there've been seasons where I really resonated with the worship through song and sermons, where my small group has had amazing relationships, where the church has made impact in the world, where I've agreed with the direction of leadership. And other times when I was not that drawn to what was happening in the services, or a relationship was deeply painful, or the people I liked best moved, or all my church relationships just felt stagnated, or we got too inwardly focused, or I disagreed with leadership.

In each of my previous churches, I have experienced periods of great blessing and times when I felt like leaving for another church. It's hard to keep loving when things are like that.

With hindsight, I'm thankful I stayed in each of those churches until I moved to a new city. I saw God bless those decisions, growing my character in perseverance and eventually providing, as I stayed, some lifelong friendships.

Now I'm not saying a person should never leave a church or that the circumstances will always improve. But I am suggesting that truly life-changing relationships are on the other side of being willing to keep giving yourself to a local body of Christ, loving and serving even when it's hard. That you're only really living when you're loving.

Jesus said hard, powerful words about these things. That it is more blessed to give than to receive, that the one willing to lose his life for Jesus will find life, that the greatest is the servant of all.

IV. Conclusion

A. Let's live as a secure community, serving Christ's cause, all in love.

This morning we've seen that life-changing relationships require community, cause, and love. Community, that as the body of Christ, we all belong to Jesus and each other and have

important things to contribute, so let's live like it. Cause, that we serve the very cause of Jesus, helping each other grow, supporting each other, and serving Christ's mission in the world together. All in love, the most excellent way.

Life-changing relationships are not the norm, and as we live them, by God's grace, we will be blessed and lovingly invite our community into the life-changing relationships with God, each other, and our world that everyone needs.

B. Interview with Christopher and Allison Pailes about life-changing relationships

Now I'd like to invite Christopher and Allison Pailes to join me up front to share about their experiences with relationships at Northwest. The Pailes moved to San Antonio and Northwest about three and a half years ago. I've invited them up front to share about their experiences as a member of a care group and now as they do a great job leading a care group. Afterwards we'll take the Lord's Supper together.

How have you experienced life-changing relationships in your care groups?

Could you share an example of how you've seen others experience life-changing relationships in your care groups?

Now you're always excited to load your kids in the car and drive them up to church again on Sunday evening to lead your care group, right?

You're busy people stewarding a lot of great things, and it's hard to prepare and get back up here on Sunday evenings, so why have you stuck with care groups?

C. Transition to the Lord's Supper

Would you join me in thanking Christopher and Allison for sharing? Now I'd like to invite Bob Jenness to the front. We're going to conclude our message on life-changing relationships by coming as Christ's body, to Christ's table, to share the Lord's Supper.