

**Work story shows the pain of poor relationships...**

Back in college, I was an accounting major, and the big accounting firms would come to campus for a month to recruit students. They'd take us out for fun activities and dinners and happy hours. You'd be getting to know the firms, and they'd be getting to know you. It was kind of like a tame version of rush for us nerdy accounting students.

And during this process the firms would also do interviews and narrow down their list, eventually offering internships to some of the students.

I did my internship with an accounting firm called Deloitte. During the internship, unless you really messed things up, the firms were still in a recruiting mode, trying to get you to work for them when you graduated. So during my internship there were more group activities and dinners, and that, plus work time and trainings together meant that you got to know your internship class pretty well.

After my internship, I agreed to work with Deloitte full time. But around the same time, in my last year of college, God was giving me a heart for Him and for ministry, and when I was about to graduate, my church asked if I'd stick around and intern full-time with the college ministry. So I did for two years, and Deloitte, graciously, let me defer my start date.

So fast forward two years, I start at Deloitte in Dallas with a week-long training for new hires. In the training rooms you're with new hires from all over the country, so everyone is getting to know each other. But at meals and in the evenings, people stuck with their local office.

So at lunch on my first day of training, I find a table with other new hires from the Dallas office and introduce myself and sit down. They introduce themselves back, and I pick up quickly that they had all interned together two years after I did and are good friends. I try to jump in the conversation, and ask questions to get to know them, but their curt answers and body language spoke volumes about their lack of interest in getting to know this new guy.

So before lunchtime is even over, I say, "it was nice to meet you guys", receive some mild smiles back, and I get up from the lunch table. And as I go to throw away my trash, I look over the lunchroom, and see all these groups of new hires who already knew each other from their internships eating together, and I feel a disquietedness within as I'm all alone.

## **Relevance: our relationships make a huge difference**

I bet I'm not the only one here who's felt that way. We were designed by our relational God for good relationships, and it's painful when we don't experience them. Whether it's feeling disconnected, like I did, or having a close friend move away, or feeling betrayed by someone you trusted, relationships can just be so hard.

Many things work against good relationships. You're busy, other people are busy, the digital world distracts us, everyone has problems, we hurt each other with our sin struggles, we've got different personalities and priorities, sometimes we have to move and must start over relationally, or our friends move and we have to start over relationally, people get sick, pass away; there are challenges.

And these many challenges aren't just "out there" in broader society, they're in here as well. Relationships can even be a struggle in our church family. And when we don't have good relationships, it harms our well-being and health and the people around us.

But when relationships flourish, it's a game changer. Not only can good church relationships make a huge impact in your life, but if you're a parent, how much you do or don't prioritize relationships here in Christ's body communicates a lot to your kids about the faith.

## **Orienting to God's Word**

Church relationships matter, so let's ask for God's help and then look to His Word for guidance. Father...

Today we're talking about good relationships in the church from 1 Corinthians chapter 12. So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

As you're opening to 1 Corinthians 12, I'll share some background. 1 Corinthians is a letter written by Paul, a very important early church leader, to the church in the ancient city of Corinth. That church was a mess relationally. There was division, immoral living, mistreatment, unhealthy conflict, and self-importance. So in chapter 12 Paul provides guidance on good relationships for that church, and it's wisdom for our church too.

Because it's about the church, 1 Corinthians 12 addresses Christians. If you don't yet identify yourself as a follower of Jesus, know that we want you to enjoy good relationships here

too. Let's serve our community together as we pack grocery sacks and teach English as a Second Language classes. Let's connect and explore the faith together in small group Bible studies.

### **Teaching: In Christ's body...**

*You belong (12-16)* – But for now, let's explore 1 Corinthians chapter 12, starting in verse 12.

#### **(12-16)**

<sup>12</sup> Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many. <sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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.

So God has designed two bodies, our physical bodies, and the metaphorical body of Christ, which is the church, the people of the church, not the building. And these verses show that God's design of the human body helps us see how to function as Christ's body.

The first thing we see is that in Christ's body, you belong. You really belong. These verses make it clear that just as the physical parts of a body, like the foot, hand, and eye, all belong to the one body, so every follower of Jesus here belongs in Christ's body.

And verse 13 shows that worldly divisions can't keep us from belonging. Back then people were divided as Jews vs. Gentiles and slaves vs. free. But for them back then, and for us today, whatever our races, nationalities, socio-economic statuses, politics, theological distinctives, diverse spiritual gifts, even different sports teams, we the English and Spanish speaking believers of Northwest all belong to Jesus and each other.

I bet you've experienced feeling like you didn't belong somewhere, like I did at the new hire training. But when it comes to the church, we all belong, there are no spiritual orphans in God's family. No matter how disconnected or different that you feel, no matter what conflicts you might have, verse 13 powerfully reminds us that we all belong to Jesus and each other. Verse 13 says that the very Spirit of God Himself baptized each of us into Christ's body. That's the final word on the matter, you belong.

So let's live like it, helping each other experience the belonging that we already possess in Jesus. When I left that unfriendly lunch table on the first day of training, I was just as much of a Deloitte employee as the rest, but I sure didn't feel like one.

So the next day at lunch, with some trepidation this time, I sit down with another group from the Dallas office and introduce myself. They introduce themselves back, and I again pick up quickly that they interned together and are good friends. I try to jump in the conversation, and I ask questions to get to know them, and to my relief, this group is a lot more open to the new guy. And things began to click as we discover some similarities, and this day I didn't leave the lunch table early, no longer experiencing that disquietedness within, starting to feel like I belong among the new hires.

What a blessing it is to feel that sense of belonging, and what an opportunity we have here to help each other to feel that belonging too. None of us can be close friends with everybody in the church, and some of us are more extroverted than others, but we can all strive in our own ways to help others here feel like they belong, because we all do. And when new people come into this church, may we all be more like the second table of new hires than the first. You can look at your phones all week, so when we're here, let's put them down and look around, and give someone a sense of welcome.

If you're new and just want to check things out from a distance, we get that and want to give you space for that, but our heart is for everyone here to grow into an experience that's more than just an occasional attendance experience, more than just an observation experience. We want everyone to feel connected to Christ's body.

*You're needed (17-20)* – And helping others feel belonging is just one of many ways that you're needed here, which we see starting in verse 17. **(17-20)**

<sup>17</sup> 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? <sup>18</sup> But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. <sup>19</sup> If they were all one part, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

In these verses Paul continues to compare the body of Christ, the church, to a human body. As the eye, ear, and nose are enriched by each other, so we are enriched by the diversity of gifts in Christ's body.

Like the parts of a human body, we all have functions and need each other. God's Spirit works in you, yes you, in unique ways that we need. And notice, as verse 18 says, that God does not haphazardly arrange the members of each church. He places every part of Christ's body just where He wants it to be. So there's no room for thinking that you're not needed here, or that what you bring doesn't matter.

That first "new hires" table may not have needed relationship with me, but you are needed here. Verse 18 says you have been placed at Northwest by God Himself to bless this body. So if you're on the sidelines, here only observing, only consuming, we need you in the game.

There are people here who need your relationship to be more than just when our bossy pants worship leader tells us to say hi to somebody. There are people here who need your gifts, your service, your prayers. It's like the parts of a human body working together for the common good of the body, that's what it's like here in Christ's body.

And I thank God that so many of you know that you're needed, and bring your gifts, blessing this body of Christ and the community around us. Without your servant's hearts, we'll never experience the relationships we long for. So may your tribe increase, and thank you for helping us to know God better.

My favorite illustration of this comes 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 was really bummed. So he tried to help himself feel better by thinking about how at least he'd 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 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. We need your spiritual gifts, ministry passions, personality, culture, and testimony here. 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.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s nothing greater than knowing Jesus, and we need you for that pursuit. There are people here who need your spiritual gifts and ministry passions to know Jesus better, people here who need to hear your insights, teaching, or testimony to know Jesus better, people here who need your generosity, service, or prayers to know Jesus better.

*You’re in need (21-24a)* – And this C.S. Lewis illustration shows not only that you’re needed: that we need you to know God, but also that you’re in need: that you need us to know God. The passage says this as well, starting in verse 21. **(21-24a)**

<sup>21</sup> 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!” <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, <sup>24</sup> while our presentable parts need no special treatment.

In verse 21, Paul makes the point that all parts of the body are essential. Just as the eye can’t say to the hand, “I don’t need you”, so you can’t say that you don’t need the members of Christ’s body here. You’re in need. In verse 22 Paul strongly reinforces this idea by saying that even the parts of Christ’s body that seem weaker are actually indispensable for us.

These verses remind us that you’re in need, that you can’t grow yourself into maturity in Jesus. So don’t strain to be complete by yourself; Jesus gifts His body to help you.

As one of my seminary professors liked to say, the Bible shows us that, “You’re doing spiritual growth wrong if you’re trying to do it on your own.” In fact, when you read the passages in the New Testament about spiritual growth, they are almost never about an individual believer growing. Rather, the Bible describes Christ’s church helping each other to grow together.

This is my son Grant’s Boba Fett toy. I didn’t just break it, it has removable hands. Now you can probably imagine Grant taking the hand off for a flying punch. But what would you think if Grant kept Boba Fett’s hand off permanently, and only played with the hand? Just the hand is fine for a little while, but it’s incomplete on its own.

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 62. I first heard this used as a sermon illustration by Pastor Tim Keller.

It's missing the richness of the whole Boba Fett experience: the blaster, the cool body armor, the jet pack, capturing Han Solo, battling Luke Skywalker, falling into the Sarlacc Pit. And what about the mysterious snake around his middle, that's not Star Wars canon, but you could make a cool backstory about how he got it.

As we think about our spiritual lives, I wonder if yours is more like the hand off on its own, or connection with the body. Maybe, like the hand, you're keeping a distance because you've been hurt by someone in Christ's body in the past. I get that temptation to disengage, I've been wounded by Christians too. Or maybe you just think you're doing good, spiritually speaking, on your own, that occasionally attending a service here without ever getting to know anyone is all that you need.

If that's what you think, 1 Corinthians 12, and many other Bible passages, say, "No, you're are not good on your own, you're in need." You won't do well spiritually on your own any more than an amputated hand does well apart from its body. There's not a single verse in the New Testament that affirms, or is even neutral, to the idea of a Christian not being in relationship with other members of Christ's body.

Jesus gave His disciples a new command. He said, "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. But how are you supposed to love like Jesus if you're off on your own, away from His body?

Don't go it alone, it won't go well spiritually if you do. And if more members of Christ's body here at Northwest disengage, our whole body loses. Remember, it's not just that you're in need, but that you're needed in the body.

### **Next Step**

This morning we've seen that in Christ's body, you belong, you're needed, and you're in need. So this message is an invitation to participation in Christ's body, for us to experience the fullness of the body of Christ.

Now it's not always easy to develop good spiritual relationships in the body on our own, so that's why we have small groups. And that's our next step this morning. If you're not connected here in relationships where you're being helped to take next steps with Jesus, and you're helping others to take next steps, then try a small group. It matters for your spiritual

health, and if you're a parent, it's an important thing to model for your kids too if you want to increase the likelihood of them walking with Jesus for a lifetime.

To help you take that next step of trying a small group, there's a handout in your program that lists all the adult small groups and what they do, so get that out. If you're an adult and don't have a handout, raise your hand and the Deacons will get you one. Get a handout even if you're in a group, because knowing the groups can help you invite others to your group and to other groups.

And to make it easier to connect, the small group leaders will be in the Hospitality Center after the service today for you. And in addition to the small groups, I'm excited to share that our Young Adults Ministry is reforming. It's led by Gene & Heather Muckleroy and JD & Kristi Gerard. They'll be gathering with young adults to share a meal and about the ministry on Saturday, January 25<sup>th</sup> at 6pm at Pastor Dave and Kathy's house. So if you're a young adult, come connect after the service in the Hospitality Center and on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

But what if you're already in a small group? Your next step is to keep living as the body of Christ in your group. Live like you belong, you're needed, and you're in need.

Any of us can come to small group at times struggling with a sin issue, feeling disconnected from God or His people. And what a difference it makes in those moments when we help each other feel our belonging in Christ's body as we warmly engage.

And what a difference it makes when you know that you're needed, coming to your group thinking "my gifts are needed here, God help me to bring them today to bless my group." Experiencing over time the truth of Jesus' words: that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

And what a difference it makes when you also know that you're in need. It helps you to come consistently and to open up and receive support for your struggles, because you know that you weren't designed to thrive spiritually on your own. Experiencing over time gratitude for your group as God works through them to help you to take next steps with Jesus.

The kind of relationships we've been talking about here this morning are not the norm, but as we live them by God's grace, He will build something great in our church family that's great for the community around us. So thank you for living as Christ's body, where you belong, you're needed, and you're in need. Let's pray...

Dismissal – Come to the Hospitality Center and go in peace to love and serve the Lord.