

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(September 12, 2021)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Everybody in the Game**

(Serving Jesus Together)

#### **The Shape of God's Body<sup>1</sup>**

(1 Corinthians 12:14-26; Gospels and Acts)

Study #1

#### **Introduction: Metaphorically speaking...**

*"You are my sunshine."*

*"She is a walking dictionary."*

*"My emotions are a roller coaster."*

*"He is a stuffed shirt!"*

And my favorite, which is funny on so many levels,

*"My computer is a dinosaur."*

Those sentences are *metaphors*. Metaphors are figures of speech we use to clarify a message, drive home a point, or cast vision.

Metaphors are among a communicator's most useful tools. And, given the importance of the message found in the Bible, we aren't surprised that it is chock-full of metaphors.

When we hear, **[Psalm 23:1] The Lord is my Shepherd**", we imagine God's care. When we hear **[Psalm 119:105] Your Word is a lamp to my feet**, we understand Scripture's role of providing guidance. And when we hear, **[James 3:6] The tongue is a fire**", we are warned of the destructive power of out-of-control speech.

And when the Apostle Paul wanted to explain what God's new thing - the church - was all about to the Christians in the city of Corinth, he went searching for an adequate metaphor.

He tried several on for size.

He referred to the church as God's field (1 Corinthians 3:9a), meaning that the church is the setting in which God sows seed (the Gospel), grows things/believers, and produces a crop.

Then he said that the church is, metaphorically, a building. (1 Corinthians 3:9b) Paul himself had laid the foundation of the building by sharing the Gospel and making disciples in Corinth. Others were laying on the superstructure of a well-informed faith.

Paul further developed the building image, telling us that the church is a special kind of building - a temple. God lives in the church. We, the people of God, are God's temple. (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

These metaphors are all helpful. But the metaphor Paul finally latched onto and the one he referred to in nearly all of his letters is that of the church as a *human body*.

This image is Spirit-inspired genius because it is one that we can all understand. We all have bodies. Saying that the church is a "body" was and is universally understood and appreciated.

It is the implications of the church as a body - and especially as Jesus' body! - that I want to explore with you today as we begin a new series of studies, focusing on the theme of serving Jesus together with, ***"Everybody in the Game!"***

*Our new series...*

In the coming weeks, Jeff and I are going to highlight the important role each of us has been given to play a part in fulfilling Jesus' mission. We're going to focus on the honor of serving Jesus.

It really is an amazing thing that God invites us to do for Him what He could do by Himself, instantly and perfectly and easily.

<sup>1</sup> I use this phrase with gratitude to author Philip Yancey, who wrote an article by the same name many years ago in Leadership Magazine.

God could unilaterally do everything that needs to be done in the universe. But He doesn't. He delights to use us in His service.

As C. S. Lewis once wrote, "[God] seems to do nothing Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye."<sup>2</sup>

Today, God invites us who believe in Jesus to share the Gospel, make disciples of all people, meet needs in Jesus' Name by every means available, pray, give, love as Jesus loved, and serve as Jesus served.

Once, as He looked at a crowd of people, Jesus said to His disciples, **[John 4:35]...Raise your eyes and observe the fields, that they are white for harvest.** - metaphorically referring to people as crops ripe for picking.

Matthew recorded a similar scene and quoted Jesus, who told His followers to **[Matthew 9:38]...Plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.**

That was the scene in Samaria, two thousand years ago. I believe that we face the same today.

There is a pressing, time sensitive need for those who believe in Jesus to serve Jesus. People are hungry for what only Jesus can provide

Today, there are school fields and work fields and neighborhood fields and church fields that are ripe for harvest.

The amazingly great news is that this - serving Jesus - is what we were made for and what we were saved for.

Serving Him is the most fulfilling way to spend an hour out of any day and it is the most fulfilling way to invest a life. And Jesus invites all of us who believe in Him to the high calling of a life of serving Him.

Remember. God adopts us into His family as His sons and daughters, giving us eternal life when we believe in Jesus AT NO COST to us. Why? Because Jesus paid it all.

But we enter into an abundant life with Jesus, here and now, when we actively choose to become His servants. And He is inviting us all, here and now, into the joy and abundance of serving Him.

This is His plan and vision for you. And it is His plan and vision for our church that we would be a "body" of people who serve Jesus, together.

If we increasingly become a Jesus-serving church, it will be because we have each learned to see ourselves as parts of the body of Christ, and together, as being the body of Christ.

So, it is to 1 Corinthians 12 we will now turn to see, first, the beauty of a diversified unity.

### **The Beauty of a Diversified Unity (12:14-19)**

#### **"I Am a Necessary Part of the Body of Christ" (vv. 14-17)**

*The human body is made up of diverse parts (v. 14)*<sup>3</sup>

**[14] For the body is not one part, but many.**

Paul wants us to think about the human body. There are, of course, some parts that get more attention than other parts.

But one quick glance is all we need to validate that the body contains lots and lots of diverse parts, all of which are crucial to the proper functioning of the whole.

This diversity is not an accidental element of the body. It is part of God's design. Diversity is of the body's very essence.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that the foot does not compare itself with the eye and the ear doesn't compare itself with the hand. We are prone to envy those who have similarities to us, rather than those who are patently in a different class.

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, Studies in Theology.

But there were some Christians at Corinth who believed that they didn't count for much in the church. Maybe they didn't have an up-front leadership role. Maybe they were young, or poor, had a troubled past, or didn't have much to say at public meetings.

Paul's heart went out to that Christian who didn't believe that he/she had anything significant to offer Jesus by way of service.

To the person in the first century or in the twenty-first century who believes that they are excess baggage in the body of Christ, Paul created an imaginary speech and puts it in the mouth of the foot.

*For example... (vv. 15-16)*

Hand and foot (v. 15)

***[15] If the foot says, "Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any less a part of the body.***

No observer, looking at the body, would say that the foot is unimportant. The foot is clearly an important part of the human body.

As the son of a podiatrist, I can testify that feet come in very handy. Feet put food on the table and a roof over our heads.

We can, though, understand how the poor foot might think this way.

The foot in Paul's speech is comparing itself to the hand. While I've seen some very attractive toe rings, the hand is more often the one with the bling. And people shake hands when they meet. Not feet.

So, this poor foot is depressed because it isn't an honored hand. Paul assures the foot that it is very much a valued part of the body.

The foot is critical for getting from place to place, kicking soccer balls, or pushing down on the brake pedal. Twist your ankle and see if it isn't part of your body.

Then, in case the hand and foot story hasn't convinced us of how important each part of the body is to the whole, Paul created another speech. We now listen to what the ear says.

Eye and ear (v. 16)

***[16] And if the ear says, "Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body," it is not for this reason any less a part of the body.***

This is just like the argument the foot made. And, again, we can understand where the ear is coming from. After all, we don't usually notice ears. Some people cover them up with hair on purpose. And I'm not aware that many love sonnets have been written about ears.

Paul corrects the ear, though, and assures it that just because it isn't an eye, it is still every bit as much a part of the body as the eye is.

Ears hear the coming car, the song, the voices of loved ones and the Word of God. No other part of the body can do any of that.

Then, Paul writes the following for every foot and ear out there that might think itself superfluous.

*No body part is unnecessary (v. 17)*

***[17] If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?"***

A body just doesn't function right without great diversity of parts. Some functions don't happen without certain parts.

We can all let our minds wander, thinking about the things that won't get done if one part, one organ, or one bodily system is gone.

But it all works because the body was designed by God, who knew exactly what He was doing when He put it all together.

**"God Has Put Me Where He Wants Me in the Body" (vv. 18-19)**

***[18] But now God has arranged the parts, each one of them in the body, just as He desired. [19] If they were all one part, where would the body be?***

God designed the foot to touch the ground and the hand to stick out from the end of the arm and the thumb to be opposed to the other fingers and kidneys to come in pairs and flesh to cover those kidneys and a skull to protect the brain and the knee to go so far and no farther.

In the same way, God designed the church ***“just as He desired.”*** He has placed Christians - with their varied and diverse gifts and interests - in the body of Christ ***“just as He desired.”***

Paul wrote what we have just read because there were some Christians in Corinth who felt insecure about their place in the church. They believed that they didn't have much to offer to the work of Jesus.

There may be some of you here today who feel the same way. If so, Paul is writing to you.

You have been gifted by God to serve Jesus. Your contribution won't look exactly like anybody else's contribution because God builds uniqueness into each one of us. The church is not a melting pot, but a salad bowl where each of us retains our identity.<sup>4</sup>

God will use your life story, your personality, your relational web, your passions, and that special energizing gifting of the Spirit to press Jesus into your world.

So, some Christians at Corinth believed - and maybe some at Northwest believe - that they aren't important to the mission of the body of Christ.

Paul has dealt with them, but that was only half of the problem at Corinth.

There were other Christians in that church who thought that they alone WERE the church. They didn't think that they needed the rest of the parts.

Paul has words for them, too.

### **The Power of Serving Jesus Together**

**“YOU are a Necessary Part of the Church” (vv. 20-21)**

*The fact of unity (v. 20)*

***[20] But now there are many parts, but one body.***

Yes, DIVERSITY is a beautiful thing. But, just as great a reality as diversity is the power of an inter-dependent UNITY.

Body parts start talking again, and we listen to what they say.

*Unity implies interdependence (v. 21)*

***[21] And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; or again, the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”***

Here, the eye and the head are being arrogant. They are clearly important to the body. Nobody doubts that. But they think that they can function independent of other members of the body. How foolish.

That kind of thinking would be as wrong as a Christian thinking that the work of Jesus only requires her and other heads, or him and other eyes.

Arrogant body parts and arrogant Christians could not be more wrong.

And this is where Paul puts to death the idea of the super-Christian and the *“I've got this”* Christian.

**“You are an Important Part of the Church” (vv. 22-24a)**

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<sup>4</sup> Like the Yiddish proverb says, *“If I try to be like him, who will be like me?”*

**[22] On the contrary, it is much truer that the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary [23] and those parts of the body, which we consider less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor, and our less presentable parts<sup>5</sup> become much more presentable, [24] whereas our more presentable parts have no need of it.**

Paul's pointing out here the obvious fact that some body parts are not considered suitable for public display. In their case, we cover them with clothing. Or God covers them with skin.

But lack of appearances can be deceptive. Hidden body parts may not get the acclaim that the "on display" parts do. Sure. But that doesn't mean that they are unimportant.

And Paul doesn't say that the less presentable / weaker parts are *OK* or *good*. He says that they are *necessary*.

And as it is in the human body, so it is in the body of Christ.

A high-profile leader of some ministry might believe that he doesn't need others.

He is dead wrong because the overall health of any ministry or church is as dependent on the shy and the retiring and the behind-the-scenes servant as it is on the up-front extrovert.

In fact, if we want to fully apply what Paul is saying here, we will judge the health of any expression of the body of Christ on the basis of how it treats, includes, and honors those who might slip through the cracks or go unnoticed.

God doesn't value the service of a Christian based on how public the service was, but on how sincerely it was offered.  
not on how big the gift was, but how sacrificial it was.  
not on how showy the contribution was, but on how loving it was.

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<sup>5</sup> Many have understood that Paul has the internal organs and the sexual organs in view here.

God put together the body of Christ with as much forethought as He put into the makeup of the human body. And God's purpose in both "bodies" is identical.

**Summary: God's Purposeful Organizing of the Body (vv. 24b-26)**

**[24b] But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that part which lacked, [25] so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same care for one another. [26] And if one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if a part is honored, all the parts rejoice with it.**

Those words apply equally well to the human body and to the body of Christ, the church.

With respect to the church, God's vision was to create a community in which there would be a seamless unity.

The church was designed to be an organism in which there will be no division, no boasting, no envy. Instead, there will be mutual care and compassion and appreciation as each part carries out his or her role.

Just like on any given Sunday morning, our music is provided by vocalists, by rhythm, bass, and electric guitarists, by percussionists and keyboardists, and by those who mix the sound and run the presentation software.

Nobody's jealous and nobody's boasting. It all just works because everybody's contributing what they have to offer.

Or like our Food Pantry.

The one who organizes works with the ones who bring beans and powdered milk and pancake mix who work with the ones who pack the bags who work with the ones who hand them out during the week. Everybody is important. It's a team thing, a "body" thing.

The same thing is true with every ministry in our church, every church and ministry in our city, and every cross-cultural ministry we

support. Multiple people doing diverse jobs carry out the work of Jesus. Together.

We are most like the body of Christ we were created to be when everybody serves and when everybody's contribution is valued.

And there's one more thing...

We've spent some good amount of time seeing the importance of every person's contribution to the work of Jesus from 1 Corinthians 12. That's where Paul used the metaphor of the body to clarify what the church is all about.

We're going to close today by zeroing in on the term "the body of Christ" from a slightly different angle.

Let's consider Jesus.

### **The Church: The 2021 "Body" of Jesus**

#### **The Words and the Works of Jesus**

Jesus of Nazareth was and is the most compelling Person to have ever lived.

When you next read through the four books from which we get all our knowledge of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), you will meet a Man who was like no other.

- He met needs, often by miracles of healing or by creating needed resources (like fish and loaves)
- He showed the power of God by other kinds of miracles, proving that He was who He said He was.
- He taught like no one ever had, explaining God and His ways so that every open heart could understand.
- He invited everyone to receive eternal life by believing in Him.
- He taught His followers how to live, love, and serve.

In the four Gospels you will meet a Man of unrivaled courage and character, who spoke truth to power fearlessly. He was a Man and was clearly more than a man.

When you meet Jesus, you will meet a Man who, while great, lived to serve, while deserving of honor, washed His disciples' feet, and while a king, offered Himself as a sacrifice to bring others to God.

Jesus was the holiest, most loving Person who has ever lived.<sup>6</sup>

And, for the years of His earthly life, this was who Jesus was. These were the things Jesus did, in the flesh, in the body.

Guess what? Jesus is still doing these same sorts of things. Jesus' "body" is still active in the world.

It turns out that when Paul imagined the church as a human body, he had certainly come up with a brilliant metaphor. But it was more than a metaphor.

Today, not at all metaphorically, but REALLY, the church is the physical presence - the body - of Jesus. The church is the shape of Jesus' body in the world, in 2021.

It's obvious if we look closely at one part of 1 Corinthians 12 where Paul was highlighting both diversity and unity.

#### **The Words and the Works of Jesus' Body, in 2021**

*From 1 Corinthians 12 (Christ / the church)*

He writes, ***[1 Corinthians 12:12] For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is the church Christ.***

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<sup>6</sup> When describing Jesus to a group of outsiders in the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius, the Apostle Peter summarized Jesus' life and ministry with this: ***[Acts 10:38] You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.***

Notice that he doesn't end the verse by saying, "***so also is the church.***" He ends by saying, "***so also is Christ.***"

There could be no clearer way to communicate the significance of the church than this. The church IS the presence of Jesus Christ in the world today.

We also see this identification of Jesus with the church in Acts 9 where Luke tells the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

*From Acts 9 (the conversion of Saul of Tarsus)*

When the risen Jesus confronted Saul - the future Apostle Paul - on the road to Damascus, He asked, **[Acts 9:4]... "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"**

Saul must have been confused because he knew that he hadn't been persecuting Jesus.

He had been arresting and imprisoning and killing Christians. He had been persecuting the church. Right. Jesus' point was exactly that. "*Saul, if you persecute the church, you are persecuting Me.*"

And we see the same thing at the beginning of the book of Acts.

*From Acts 1 (Jesus is continuing what He began)*

Luke starts off this book, addressing his friend, Theophilus. He was writing to let Theophilus know the whole Christian story. He wrote in two parts, stating off with the Gospel of Luke and continuing with what we call the book of Acts.

Here's how Luke put it: **[Acts 1:1] The first account I composed, Theophilus** (referencing the Gospel of Luke), **about all that Jesus BEGAN** (my emphasis) **to do and teach...**

By the word *began* Luke is implying that what follows (in Acts) is about all that Jesus *continued* to do and teach.

The difference is that now, Jesus is doing it through the agency of His people, who make up the church.

So, what the Lord Jesus did in His physical body before He was crucified, He is continuing to do through the church.

It's what the church has been called to do and it's what the church has always done when it's been healthiest for the last two thousand years:

- Meet human needs, by whatever means are available.
- Teach about God and His ways so that everyone can understand.
- Invite people to receive the gift of eternal life by believing in Jesus.
- Make disciples of all people by teaching followers to take a next step into faith, love, and service.

When you and I say that we, the church, ARE the body of Christ, part of what we mean is that we are on mission to do what He did.

It will take all of us to be all that He wants to be.

### **Conclusion:**

The church IS the physical presence of Jesus in the world today.

That means that you - a believer in Jesus; a part of the church, this church - are invited to do your part in being Jesus in the world today. And you really don't want to say NO to that invitation.

God no longer reveals His shape in the form of a pillar of cloud and fire like He did in the days of Moses. He doesn't manifest as an awesome presence in the Temple as in the days of Solomon.

And we don't get to see Jesus, in the flesh, like when He walked the roads of Galilee.

No, if someone wants to see Jesus today, we can point them to the Scriptures AND we can point them to 8900 Guilbeau to give them a living illustration of Christ.

WE, the church, are the shape of God's body today and that body takes the form of a unified diversity where everybody is involved, everybody serves, everybody is off the bench and in the game.