

“CHRISTIANITY 101 (#5): BODY PARTS”

(1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

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[PROP NEEDED: “This is the Church” Video]

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 2-4-24]

--I--

1. Read CEB Tex: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 and Pray.
2. As we continue our series "Christianity 101", talking about some of the basics of Christian belief & practice & how these can make difference in our lives, today we come to a discussion about the purpose and power of the Church.

A--*WHAT* is it? *WHY* does it exist, and (given all of its imperfections & shortcomings), *WHY* do you and I need it to be faithful, growing, mature Christians?

B-- These are questions that not only many of us wrestle with today, but also by the apostle Paul in today's scripture from 1 Cor. 12, where he gives an analogy of the Church being like the parts of a human body. ¹

3. You know, as Paul identified, individually each part of our human body can't accomplish much. But when we put them all together, they form the intricate and amazing wonders of a human being.

A--And so it is with God's Church being also described as the "body of Christ" -- individually, each Christian, local church and denominational tradition is limited in what it can accomplish. But collectively, we form something amazing and wonderful.

B--You know, our English word “Church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which literally means “*a calling out*,” or a “*public assembly*.”

1--In ancient times, it actually referred to *any* assembly of citizens in a Greek city.

2--But early Christians began using this word to refer to *themselves* as a diverse assembly of people *called out* of the world *by God* NOT for special *privilege*, but for the special *purpose* of spreading His love through Jesus. ²

4. Yet, if this is what the Church is *supposed* to be, then what happened?

A--In the words of 20th-century French theologian Alfred Loisy (pronounce *Lewazee*)
"Jesus promised us the Kingdom of God. We got the church instead." ³

B--Since its inception 2000 years ago, at various times, the Church of Jesus Christ has been plagued by imperfection, hypocrisy, and division -- some of which we've experienced firsthand as a local church and as a Methodist denomination over the last few years, leaving many people jaded and disillusioned about the Church, in general.

C--Especially since the COVID-pandemic, it seems that not only our *society*, but also our *churches* (& the Christians within them) have grown less civil, less grace-filled & more judgmental -- to the point where many Pastors and church leaders (including myself for a while) have, at times, wanted to throw our hands up & say "*Forget it! This isn't worth it!*" (and many *have!*) .⁴

D--So, with all these imperfections, HOW & WHY is it that we still need the Church today? Why did *I* stick with it? And why should *YOU*, as well?

--II--

5. Well, of course one thing we have to remember is that the Church is imperfect because it is made up of imperfect people, like you and me -- *NONE* of us lives out *perfectly* that which we profess... which makes every person on earth (including you and me) a hypocrite, to one degree or another. ⁵

A--Yet, the great second-century theologian Augustine of Hippo once supposedly wrote "*The Church is a lot like Noah's ark: If it were not for the raging storm outside, you wouldn't be able to stand the stink inside.*" ⁶

B--In other words, despite its imperfections and apparent hypocrisy, the Church is nevertheless still God's "ark" of hope to help us weather the storms of life.

1--The Church was there for me when I went through several painful relationships in college.

2--It was there for Trish and I when we found out Trish had breast cancer.

3--It's been there for me through painful experiences at several of the churches that I've served.

4--And it's been there for Trish and I through the challenges of the pandemic, and (recently) through the loss of her father and mother in Tennessee.

6. Of course, some people will say, "*Well Pastor. I don't need the Church, with all its drama, because I can't be a 'good Christian' without it!*"

A--Well, I'm always amused by this logic, because I'm happy that they've figured out how to challenge their own presuppositions and move out of their own comfort zone every week *all by themselves*.

1--I'm glad that they know how to encourage *themselves* when they're down.

2--I'm thrilled that they take time to live out the mission of Jesus to change the world without help *from anyone else*.

3--And I'm thrilled that, on Sunday morning on the golf course, they worship God by bringing their Bibles along, and share scriptures and sing praise songs to God with their friends as they play golf!

4--And of course, you know I'm being extremely facetious, because I haven't figured out how to do it this way!

B--My point, of course, is that while you and I possibly *could* live out our Christian life and transform the world all *by ourselves*, the *reality* is that most of us *do not*.

C--So, what organized Christianity (the Church) does is helps us to take what would be just *good intentions* and turns them into the potential for *fulfillment*.

7. You see, even Jesus didn't think we could be a "good Christians" without being part of an organized community of believers.

A--We know this because the very *first* thing he did when he started out in ministry was to gather together a group of 12 Disciples.

B--And these weren't just 12 alike individuals who happened to be going in the same spiritual direction -- they were 12 very different people (conservatives, liberals, blue collar, white collar, city-folk, rural-folk, educated, non-educated) but ALL of whom committed to making the journey of faith with Jesus *together*.⁷

C--I think that's why, in today's scripture, Paul compares the church to a human body.

1--To him, it would make no more sense to think a person could live out their Christian faith *alone* than it would be to say that the parts of the human body -- the ear, hand, foot -- could live & function successfully *apart from* one another

2--Maybe you've heard it before, but "*A Christian without a church is like...*

<i>...a student without a school;</i>	<i>...a soldier without an army;</i>
<i>...a citizen who won't vote;</i>	<i>...a seaman without a ship;</i>
<i>...a child without a family;</i>	<i>...a drummer without a band;</i>
<i>...a ballplayer without a team;</i>	<i>...a honeybee without a hive;</i>
<i>...an ember of coal without a fire;</i>	
<i>...a scientist who does not share findings with colleagues;</i>	
<i>...a party that you have all by yourself."</i> ⁸	

--III--

8. So, WHY do you and I need the church?

A--Well, I discovered that we need it because -- despite its imperfections -- I/we really can't be strong, healthy, growing Christians *without* it!

B--We need it because, unlike any other government, civic club, or organization (non profit or otherwise), the Church of Jesus Christ is the **ONLY** institution that has the potential to change not only *us*, but the entire *world*.

C--Yes, it may consist of different "*Parts*" -- different local churches; different denominations; different ways of practicing our faith. But *together*, we are nevertheless the "*Body of Christ*."

9. To wrap up, let me invite you to watch a video that I think captures well the essence of WHAT and WHO the Church actually is...

[**SHOW VIDEO:** "*This is the Church*" (WorshipHouseMedia.com, Rype.tv, Time: 2:24)]

10. [PRAYER]

11. [HOLY COMMUNION]

12. [CLOSING SONGS: UMH#558, "We Are the Church" ; OR "How Beautiful"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ There were, in fact, other analogies/metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the Christian Church. For example, the church was called as the "bride of Christ" (Ephesians 5:22-31), "God's new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17), and as "the household/family of God" (1 Peter 4:17). However, the analogy of the Church as the "body of Christ" was used more than any other.

² Jesus himself first applied the word to his followers in Matthew 16:18 as he spoke with Peter at Caesarea Philippi. The biblical book of Acts, in fact, is a short history of the early church's efforts to share God's love through Jesus as recorded by Luke, the writer of the third Gospel. Later, one of the earliest creeds of belief in the young Christian church -- the *Nicene Creed* (found in our *United Methodist Hymnal* #880) described the nature of the Church as being "**One, Holy, Catholic/Universal, and Apostolic.**" It is "*one*" in that it is united in the faith and practice of following Jesus (NOT necessarily that every believes or practices exactly alike). It is "*holy*" in that it is set apart by God for work in the world. It is "*Catholic*" (which means "universal") in that it exists around the world. A popular children's hymn [that we're going to sing later today] puts it this way: "*The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple; The church is not a resting place, the church is a people. I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together. All who follow Jesus all around the world, yes we're the church together.*" [*We Are the Church*," *United Methodist Hymnal* #558]. And it is "*Apostolic*" in the sense that it carries on the ministry of the early Apostles and Christians.

A more contemporary way of thinking of this is that the Church is **a diverse community of people, committed to the belief and practice of Christian faith, and to the transformation of the world.** It is "*diverse*" in the sense that it's not made up of just people who look, think, or worship all the same (Read Acts 5:11, 8:1, and 9:31 for examples of this diversity), but *also* to the "*diverse*" church universal (i.e., the church throughout the world, of *all* denominations, styles of worship and ministry; Read Acts 9:31). It is a "*community*" in the sense that we can't be strong, growing, mature Christians without being *connected* to one another relationally through it -- there is no such thing as a "solitary" Christian. And this community doesn't even simply refer to God's "saints here below" in the "here and now," but also to the "saints up above" in heaven who have gone before (as well as to those who have not even been born yet)! The Bible calls this the "*communion of saints*." The "saints" who are here among us today are called "*church visible*" or the "*church militant*," and those "saints" who are in heaven with God or who have not yet been born are often referred to as the "*church invisible*" or the "*church triumphant*." Furthermore, the people of God's Church are "*committed to the belief and practice of Christian faith*", meaning that everything we say & do should reflect the ministry and teachings of Jesus. And finally, the Church exists "*for the transformation of the world*." Unlike what some folks think today, it *doesn't* exist merely to meet OUR needs, but to help equip US to meet the needs of OTHERS. As has sometimes been said, "*the Church is the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of those who aren't yet here!*"

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Loisy

⁴ Unfortunately, I know many Pastors who have, indeed, just *quit* their churches and *quit* ordained ministry over the last few years because of the incivility that they've received and experienced at the hands of "Church" people.

⁵ That's why Saint Augustine also supposedly said that "*The church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners.*" Again, the veracity of Augustine's authorship of this quote is debated, but the sentiment is still correct.

⁶ Whether or not Saint Augustine actually said/wrote this is debatable, but the essence of the argument is nevertheless sound.

⁷ In other words, the church is not simply a collection of persons who have individually discovered a personal relationship with God through their own private spirituality. No. The church is a "*community committed to the belief and practice of Christian faith, and to the transformation of the world.*" It's that entity that Jesus commissioned on earth to provide the form, means, and vehicle whereby the people of faith can *actually* transform the world.

⁸ Modified from a submission by the homiletics class of West Coast Baptist College, in *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, by Paul L. Tan. Cited at <https://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/a-christian-without-a-church>.