

Sunday - August 2, 2009
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner
Sermon - **Church: the Body of Christ**

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace, for you are our Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.”

This is a book that I've now read several times. Those of you with young children know that they latch onto particular books and want them read and re-read. My granddaughter is fascinated with this Dr. Seuss book called Inside your Outside, All About the human body. I have to admit that the human body is a particularly amazing creation. Those of us who get to hold new baby marvel at how everything is in just perfect order. And even though as we age, there are aches and pains that seem to define our body more than we'd like, still our human body is amazing.

I love fun facts --- did you know about your body that:

There are between 5 & 6 quarts of blood in our body – same as oil for a V-8 engine.

That an average human scalp has 100,000 hairs --- well, except for those in my family who are balding.

By age 60, most people have lost ½ their taste buds.

Every person has a unique tongue print.

Our eyes are always the same size from birth, but our nose and ears never stop growing.

In a lifetime the average US resident eats more than 50 tons of food and drinks more than 13,000 gallons of liquid.

The average person takes 8-10,000 steps a day on the 52 bones in the feet; this adds up to 115,000 miles in a lifetime, circling the globe nearly 5 times.

Women burn fat more slowly than men.

That doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of how incredible the human body is. So I think the Apostle Paul was pretty savvy in using the metaphor of the human body to define how we who are not related to one another through family or genetics ARE related to one another, through Christ. Paul refers to the church as the “body of Christ.” By this he does not mean Jesus Christ's literal body, he is speaking metaphorically – of Jesus' spiritual body.

Paul wrote to the church in Colosae (Turkey) saying, “Christ Jesus is the head of the body, the church...” 1:18 To the church in Corinth, Greece, Paul wrote 12:12-13 “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” And in v. 27 “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” To the church at Ephesus, Turkey he wrote 4:4 “There is one body and one Spirit.” To the church in Rome, Italy he wrote “For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another...” He went on to say that “v. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.

The church is not just some other organization or club—it's not like the rotary, or the Country Club, or the band boosters or the Boy Scouting organization – all good groups with a particular mission. The church is a group of people, who function as the body of Christ. There is no other group or institution which has stood the test of time like the church. The church of Jesus Christ has been persecuted and diminished, flourished and spread since that day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples and Jesus followers meeting in that room in Jerusalem. It has never been wiped out, though many have tried. It has gotten off course in its mission, it has some awful cruelties and wrongs to answer for over the course of history—such as the Crusades, the witch trials in our country, the ignoring of the Holocaust reality, the taking of sides along slavery lines during the Civil War. The church – since it is made up of human beings, can be faulted where it has failed to be true to the gospel of Jesus. But where and when the church has lived out being the body of Jesus Christ, it has brought honor and glory to him and made the world a better place.

What is your mental picture of the ideal church? Some people might immediately think of a certain kind of building – a wooden frame building with a steeple and a bell, others might focus on a structure with lots of stained glass, a pipe organ, others think that there must be pews in order to have an ideal church building. Some will focus on music, often a particular kind of music, some will talk about programs, such as SS, or Bible study or Youth group, or fellowship groups.

In our scripture from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote about his ideal church, but he didn't address any of the kinds of things that we typically do. Paul, didn't discuss the kind of building which it met in, nor anything really about the flow of the worship service, and certainly didn't say anything about particular committees, or programs which serve people inside and outside the church. Paul instead discussed the behavioral characteristics of those persons who are called to be the church. He said the church members at Ephesus should "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

I don't know of another organization or club which asks you to be humble, gentle, patient, to get along with others in love, to spend your time and effort to be unified in the nature and mission of Jesus Christ, to make peace your goal. These are the behavioral aspects of the church that Paul counsels us to be.

Paul then says that Jesus Christ is the one who unifies us --- who holds us together. You all readily acknowledge that even those who sit here in this sanctuary do not agree on all issues and questions – we have differences of opinion on economics, politics, sports, life styles, health care policy, monetary policies, defense policy – but we are unified in one Lord, one baptism, one God and Father of all. We know that when we believe in Jesus we are unified into a body of believers.

Paul not only defined the personality characteristics of those in the church, but he also spoke of the way that we are being given gifts by the Holy Spirit and the tasks we are called to enact. Paul said that each of us --- that means each one

of you are given a gift to be used as a part of being this body of Christ. What are these gifts? The gifts vary – not everyone is a teacher, but some are, not everyone is an encourager, but some are, and each person is needed in the church just as in one's body, all parts are needed.

Just as our individual body has each part which is necessary for our complete and full participation in life, so too is each of us needed in the body of Christ – the church – to use what we have been gifted with. We are not given gifts to hoard --- those who can saw boards and hang drywall, need to do that --- in service to the church and others. Those who can set up websites and put together webpages, need to do that for the good of the church and others, those who can set up accounts and balance financial books need to do that for the church. Those who have a knack for caring for or teaching children need to do that for the good of the church and others. Those who can lead prayer, need to offer prayers and teach others how. Those who can cook need to share that skill with the church and others.

My image for the church --- the ideal church is an open-ended circle. People come to church, hungry for relationship with Christ and other believers -- they are taught and nurtured, they are grown in their faith, and they move out to serve. The church begins dying if people just come in and only receive what the church offers --- are fed by the programs, participate in the fellowship, but sit in the chairs as couch potatoes, but do not then step on out to share with others. The ideal church brings you in, nurtures and grows you in faith, equips you to serve and sends you out.

As I worked on this message for this morning, I reflected on how some of you might think I am trying to “guilt” you into raising your hand and doing some new activity or ministry here at church. I do not want to be like Pastor Bob, in the story told in the book *Honest to God*: Pastor Bob believed in using some serious persuasion to get his congregation each year to sign up for whatever committee jobs and leadership activities needing to be filled. Pastor Bob planned to bring out the heavy artillery --- a 4 part series called *Serve or Burn*. Every sermon would begin with an illustration from the Book of Martyrs. He decided to wear a lapel microphone so he could walk the length of the stage, raise his voice a bit, perspire a bit, wave his Bible in the air, and on the last Sunday of the series, he'd layer on the guilt by inviting 7 yr. old Suzi Miller to come and tell the congregation what it would be like to spend a whole year in her 2nd grade SS class without a teacher. He figures she'll cry.... That will surely get the congregation to sign up Pastor Bob's strategy works. The *Serve or Burn* series went better than he expected. Little Suzi cried on cue. People felt worn down and guilty. The leadership positions were filled for another year. That is not my intent this morning with this message. I do not want to lay on the guilt like Pastor Bob.

As I've reflected on this message from Paul's letter today and thought about each of you sitting here..... I realized that the vast majority of you have identified your gifts and are using them --- are giving them to serve others and the church. What you are doing as a part of the body of Christ is valued, and you are not being asked to over-extend. So, maybe this is not a helpful sermon

for you today. But there are certainly some here who have not yet identified your gifts --- or who are just sitting on your gifts – so let me extend an invitation to you. Consider how the human body cannot function at its ultimate best without the use of the ears..... or the hands....or any one specific part --- in fact, you know that when you stub your toe, you then realize how important that one part of the body is. Well, so too it is with the body of Christ – the church, each part is so very important. We are each important. No one person can build the church alone. Yet, each is needed to do his or her part. Our church here at St. Matthias could serve God and others better if one of you would step up and take on the role of Coordinating missions as Bob Dixon steps down to go to seminary

- Do home and hospital visitation
- keep up the media resources
- Drive the elderly who cannot drive
- greet at the front door before worship
- serve as usher for worship services
- act as a worship lay leader
- thank you note group
- teach Disciple Bible Study
- visit first time guests after services
- be a song leader for hymns in Sunday worship

There may be some of you who are thinking, well, that's HER job --- the pastor's job. No, it's not. I cannot do all the tasks which need to be done; I am only one part of the body of Christ. My major task is to "equip the saints" --- that means help YOU to find the way you can serve others and the church.

Don't ever underestimate how important you are. YOU can literally change the world for Christ. The Chinese did. That's right. In China between 1949 and 1952, all foreign missionaries left the country. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution religious life was banned and for 40 years no one knew what was happening to the Christian movement. When the veil of secrecy was finally lifted, it was discovered that the number of Christians are now conservatively documented in 2007 at 41 million. 10,000 Chinese become Christian each day. How did this happen? It happened because ordinary Christians were empowered to exercise their spiritual gifts, and the church – the home churches, the banned yet still meeting churches experienced incredible growth. That growth happened because the professional missionaries were NOT there, and the ordinary folks had to do the work. That experience in China revealed what should be the norm for churches. Ordinary folks are the ones who really build the kingdom of God. Most Christians will never go to seminary. But you can discover your spiritual gifts and use them in a mighty way for God's purposes. A great church --- the ideal church – depends on the you who are sitting in the sanctuary. What is God calling you to do? What gift are you just sitting on? Why not find a way to use it? We'll all be the better for it.