

Rebuilding Community I Cor. 12: ; Acts 2:43-47 11/14/21

Two men were shipwrecked on a deserted island. One started screaming and yelling, “We’re going to die! We’re going to die! There’s no food, no water! We’re going to die!”

The second man was calmly propped up against a palm tree, relaxing. The first man yelled at him, “Don’t you understand? We’re going to die!”

The second man replied, “You don’t understand. I make \$100,000 a week!”

The first man looked at him, dumbfounded, and responded, “So what! Your money won’t do us any good here! We’ve got no food and no water! We’re going to die!”

The second man answered, “You just don’t get it. I make \$100,000 a week and I tithe one that income to my church. My pastor will find me!”

Yep. It’s time again for the annual stewardship sermon. And it occurred to me as I was preparing this sermon that since I’m retiring in a few months, this is probably the last stewardship sermon I’ll ever have to preach! Woo hoo! But I digress!

The theme of this year’s stewardship campaign is “Rebuilding Community.” You can see it partially covered by handprints on the banner

over there. It's a good theme for us in the wake of the pandemic, isn't it? We had to shut down a lot of ministries during the pandemic, including public worship for a while, as well as many other groups and programs. We've only bounced back to about 60% of the worship attendance we had prior to the pandemic, and our ministry groups are smaller, too. A lot of people wonder if churches will ever recover the people who have seemingly dropped out. No one really knows. But our sense of fellowship, our sense of community has definitely taken a hit! It's been a little like having a long-distance romantic relationship. You can phone and email and text and Zoom and Skype all you want, but it's just not the same as being physically together on a regular basis, is it?

In some ways the live-stream has been a real lifesaver for us, allowing people who weren't and aren't able to be here in person to experience what's going on in worship. On the other hand, it can contribute to a fundamental misunderstanding of what church really is. Listen to these words about the church from the Apostle Paul in I Cor. 12.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ¹² 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.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (I Cor. 12:4-7,12,14,26-27

The human body is Paul's favorite metaphor for the church. It reminds us that church isn't a show that you come to see, or watch via the livestream. It's not a product to be consumed, like going to a salad bar and picking what you want. It's more like a human body, with all kinds of inner connections and functions. In fact, Paul says that just like each body part has an important role to play in the human body- eyes, ears, heart, pancreas, etc.- each one of us has a function, a role to play in the church, and God has equipped each of us with special gifts and abilities so we can do our part in the Body of Christ. The church needs you to be complete! We'll be offering a course next winter or spring to help you discover what gifts God has given you if you need a little help in that area.

There's more. If I stub my toe, my whole body tries to help that little toe. My hands reach down to rub it while my eyes look carefully at the

damage. My brain comes up with a plan, and my mouth probably shouts something I wouldn't say during a sermon! Paul says that it's the same way in the church. Everyone is important and if one person is hurting, the other parts of the body care for it.

When I was a youth director, I taught our kids these things about the church. And I worked hard to find a way for each kid in the group to find and use his or her gifts. Then Mike showed up at youth group as a freshman. He was a kid with significant social and emotional disabilities. He was difficult to communicate with, got frustrated easily, and didn't pick up on social cues, so he often said the wrong thing! I found out that he was on the AV team at his high school, so I asked him to help with some of the tech needs for our group. He did a pretty good job at it and continued to come to the group all four years of high school.

At our Spring retreat, we always gave the seniors a chance to say something to the whole group around the campfire. There were about 80 kids there Mike's senior year. All the seniors spoke, except for him. I really didn't think he would be able to pull off speaking publicly, but he surprised me and stood up to speak. I kind of held my breath, not knowing where this might go! He spoke quietly and said how much he had appreciated the group. Then he said that this was the only group he had ever been in where he had felt accepted and been treated like he mattered. Then he sat

down while the rest of us tried to regain our composure. Our group had been the church for Mike, helping him find a way to use his gifts, as we accepted and supported him. That's the church! I'm thinking that you can't do that by yourself or with your family over a livestream! People need your presence. That's why church is a team sport, not an individual pursuit.

Let's look at one other biblical passage about the church. It takes place shortly after Jesus left this earth and the Holy Spirit descended on the followers of Jesus. It's a description of what the rapidly expanding, dynamic church looked like. ⁴²*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

⁴³*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.* ⁴⁴*All who believed were together and had all things in common;* ⁴⁵*they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.* ⁴⁶*Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,* ⁴⁷*praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)*

Notice that they spent lots of time together- worshiping in the temple, eating together, and visiting each other's homes. There are things that

happen face-to-face that just don't take place on-line. Now I know that during the worship service you don't have a lot of communication with those around you. Well, some of you do, but we don't encourage it! But before and after the service, important conversations happen when meaningful things are shared. You learn what someone else is going through, and you can pray for them during the week and reach out to them and assist them. And the Body of Christ begins to actually work like it's designed to!

In the early church there was also sacrificial giving in their fellowship. They sold possessions and gave the money to help those in need. (You hoped I'd forgotten that this was Stewardship message, didn't you?) But our giving is important, just like it was in that early church in Jerusalem. Your giving supports staff that puts together worship services, classes for all ages, small groups, music groups, and mission trips. It supports local mission organizations and missionaries around the world. This year, we're trying to add funding for the Faith Community Nurse position to the budget, since the grants that supported this position have run out. We need our members to step up their giving this year if we're going to be able to do that! We'd like you to be part of it!

Finally, notice that there was growth. God added to their number daily. We know that they intentionally reached out to others through the

preaching and healing ministries of the apostles. But I imagine that the fellowship described in these verses was very attractive to people in the community, and many were drawn to the church in that way. Growth is very important for us, too. It represents people who are coming to faith in Jesus and are being nurtured in that faith. And it helps to keep us fresh as an institution. What part can you play in encouraging growth here at GPC?

A country preacher was preaching very pointedly to his congregation one Sunday morning.

He said, "Now let the church walk!"

Deacon Jones said, "Amen! Let it walk!"

The preacher continued, "Let the church run!"

Deacon Jones responded, "Yes, Lord! Let it run!"

"Let the church fly!" shouted the preacher.

"Amen, brother! Let it fly!" cried Deacon Jones.

"Now it's going to take a lot of money to let the church fly, brother," said the preacher.

"Let it walk, then," said Deacon Jones. "Let it walk."

I hope you will prayerfully consider a pledge for 2022 that will let our church fly!