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11 o'clock am

Community Church of Issaquah
Issaquah, Washington

"Church Rules"

1 Corinthians 12:14-26

We are the body of Christ. Now there are a lot of different ways to think about the body of Christ. We could think of the body as those who participate in the body and the blood at the Lord's Supper. Or we could think of the body like one of those pixelated-looking photos where if you look really close it's made up of a thousand smaller photos. A Jesus Christ when you look big, and a Marilyn, Britt, Roma, Andy when you look small. Now those are all right ways of the thinking of the body of Christ, but today we're going to think of the body of Christ like this: as a *body politic* which is to say, a group of people considered as a collective unit who obey one authority.

Now for those of us who live in Issaquah or Washington or the United States of America or any nation in this entire world, we know that being a part of a body politic involves rules—ways of setting up our society so that human life can flourish. So what are the rules of this body politic? What are the rules of the body of Christ?

Today we're going to talk through four rules from 1 Corinthians 12 for us as the Body of Christ. And here they are: Rule #1 Difference is designed in. Rule #2 Christ is central. Rule #3 Collaboration is key. And Rule #4 The rejected become the accepted.

So rule number one: Difference is designed in.

Now if you hadn't guessed we're different from one another! And not just superficially so. We are different from one another in deep, basic ways. We have been from the very beginning. Listen who were a part of the body of Christ in Jesus' days:

A woman with a very un-straight-forward marital status

A corrupt tax man

A political activist

Powerful religious leaders

Obscure religious leaders

Fishermen

Day laborers

Ethnic and religious outcasts

People with disabilities

People with chronic illnesses

Children

Women

Men

People who had studied under the most renowned scholars of the day

People who hadn't had any education at all.

According to the Bible, the people who gathered around Jesus were all sorts of kinds of people. These are people with very different backgrounds and very different goals in life. There are the powerful and the unimportant. There are the strong and the weak. There are hearts and hands and knees and elbows. These people are the body of Christ, and these are the people we shouldn't be surprised to find sitting right next to us on a Sunday morning.

In the body we all have different parts, but we are brought together through our discipleship to Christ.

Sometimes, however, we think that we think that we know better than God how we exactly fit into the body of Christ. Sometimes it takes a little trial and error to know that we fit here and not there.

There is this classic story in my family about when I went up to register for classes for my freshman year at Seattle Pacific. The day had gone uneventfully—so my parents thought—when we stopped for dinner at a diner in Centralia on our way home to Portland. We're sitting down, looking at our menus when all of a sudden I burst into tears and say, "I don't want to be an engineer!" My parents had no idea what I was talking about because I had 1) never said I was considering being an engineering major and 2) never showed any special aptitude or love for science or math. What they didn't know is that my friend's dad who is an engineer had been going down to Central America to help poor farmers develop their infrastructure and I had gotten it into my head that this is what I should do to be of most help to the world. My poor parents, so concerned, could only say, "But you don't need to be an engineer, sweetie." Conclusion to the story: I majored in Spanish and theology.

I was trying to do what I thought God wanted me to do, but I had forgotten that *God does not require us to be what we aren't.*

The body of Christ isn't a Frankenstein monster. Old parts aren't jerry-rigged in different places to try to build new things. The Lord has created each of us with specific gifts for a specific purpose. And God wants us to be who we're created to be. I can't tell you what a relief it was when I realized that there are people like Earle who actually like doing all the things that engineers do. Arms don't have to do what feet do. Fingers don't need to get a college degree in how to be a knee. I have a feeling that this is exactly the kind of situation that the apostle Paul wants us to avoid: thinking that we know what the body should look like and then trying to fit ourselves into that mold.

The body simply is what we are.

But here's the trick. A body like that you would think would fall apart. A finger might want to go off and get distracted by some really interesting something over there. The arm might get tired and say, "Mmm can't lift my hand to spoon today." But the trick and the **second rule** of life in the body is that we are held together because **Christ is our head.**

Colossian 1:17-18 says,

"He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything."

Christ is the gravitational pull inside of the body, pulling everything together. Christ is the blood circulating the fresh air. Christ is the brain sending out the signals of where the body needs to go and what the body needs to be doing.

God in Jesus Christ, our representative, our example, our new Adam breathes the life of the Holy Spirit into a new body, and we become truly alive. This is a body politic *alive.*

In Christ, we find our purpose and the clarity to look at ourselves honestly. We are needed and have a purpose when we are in Christ. But sometimes like we talked about last week our gifts are unexpected and sometimes they're not what we were hoping they would be if we're honest.

Fernando Ortega who is a Christian recording artist down in the Albuquerque area once had an experience of coming to grips with where he fit in the body of Christ. He says,

"I [had flown] out to the east coast to audition for graduate schools in piano performance. I had worked hard for several years and knew my pieces well. I was practicing Chopin

Ballade #3 one night at The Juilliard School... nervous about my audition at Stony Brook the next day. Suddenly I heard the same piece coming out of a practice room down the hall. The person playing was a fantastic pianist - technique to burn - gorgeous, mature tone - deep, thoughtful musicianship. I recognized instantly that at my very best, I would never be capable of playing the Ballade as well as this person. Thoroughly intimidated, I walked down the hall and peeked into the practice room from where the incredible sound was coming. Seated at the piano was a young girl, maybe 13 or 14 years old.

The lesson for me was huge and devastating. In an instant, I became acutely and painfully aware of the limitations of my gifts as a pianist. I was not a world-class pianist (as I had secretly entertained in my mind). I was merely a good pianist - better than average, but by no means gifted enough to compete in the classical world I longed to be part of. I fell into a depression that lasted two years as I began to sort out more honestly what musical talents I had been given, and which talents I had not been given. I look back on the whole experience and recognize God's hand of mercy on my life."

One of the hardest experiences' of Fernando's life and yet he says, he looks back and sees God's hand of mercy. Would that we all be able to recognize God's hand of mercy when we find out our limits. It's a hand of mercy because it's a lot of work to try to be what we not in fact are. But anyone who has come up against a limit knows that it's not easy to see the mercy in it at first.

But you know why limits are good? They are good because they push us towards one another. When we hit a limit we are forced to ask for help. Maybe in some imaginary really well oiled body other parts can intuit needs. But in real life, we have to voice our needs.

Anyone who has been married or had deep friendships knows this. Sometimes we have to swallow our pride and say what we need. We have to say, "Hey I can't quite get to where I need to get and I need a boost."

And that is exactly the **third rule** of the body: **The key is collaboration.** Since you or I can only be one part, we need to figure out how to work with other parts.

If you want to see what collaboration looks like read the book *Watership Down*, but warning I'm going to completely spoil the book for you right now, so cover your ears if you're planning on reading it.

The premise of *Watership Down* is that there are a group of rabbits who are on a quest to establish a new rabbit warren. You see, the runt of the old warren, Fiver, has had a vision that the old warren is going to be destroyed which eventually does come true. He starts telling the other rabbits that this is going to happen, but most scoff at him. A small band however believes and set out to leave with him in search of another home. Fiver is small and weak, but at key points he has visions that steer the band away from great danger. But his insight isn't enough to bring the band to a new safe home. His brother Hazel also isn't large or powerful but he is loyal and makes sure no one is left behind. He keeps the band together. He becomes the band's leader. Then there's Bigwig—a large and powerful rabbit who is cunning and devises shrewd plans to defeat dangerous rabbits they encounter along the way. And the group definitely wouldn't have been able to get to its new home without clever Blackberry who recognizes that wood floats right when they need to cross a stream to escape from their former warren's soldier rabbits. Each rabbit has an essential role in helping this little group get to where it needs to go.

Now one of the parts of the story to note is that the weakest bunny, Fiver, is the key to the whole endeavor. This is **our fourth and final rule: The rejected become the accepted.** In the body of Christ, the weak have a special place. This is what a healthy community looks like: the weakest are seen for their gifts.

Remember back to that list of people who were a part of the body of Christ from the earliest of days. As Paul says at the beginning of 1 Corinthians “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” We’re a motley group! If we’re honest, most of us are probably a little runty. But here is the glory of the Christian body politic. In the body of Christ, the less respectable are treated with greater respect. The less honorable with more honor. God chooses what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

In the body of Christ, the rules of the world are flipped. The strong don’t rule. Force and violence don’t take the day. Because Christ is our head, we learn to honor the weak. Because Christ is our head, we can accept one another’s differences rather than reject them. Because Christ is our head, we are held together, held together by communion, held together in the Spirit, held together by a love that lifts up the weak and honors the dishonored. Amen.