

# “Living Bodies”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – September 10, 2023*

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 51:1-8

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Romans 12:1-8

Tomorrow morning, just before 9 am, many of us will pause and remember what took place – and likely where we were – when the first plane hit the Twin Towers in New York City twenty-two years ago on 9-11. We will recall not only the tragedy and chaos of that day, but also what took place in the aftermath; how – in ways that we have not experienced since – our nation, our “body politic,” came together in unity and mutual love; how – personally and collectively – our thoughts and actions coalesced to focus on how to best serve and support one another.

The Apostle Paul never forgets that – as individuals and communities – we are embodied creatures. Everything that we think, say, or do takes place in a body comprised of different parts.

Over these next three weeks in September, we will be looking at this particular section of Paul’s letter to the Romans, starting right here at the beginning of chapter 12, where there is a notable shift in emphasis from what we believe (our theology) to the ways we behave (our ethics). And yet, the two are intricately interwoven. Belief and behavior are, as New Testament theologian N.T. Wright says, “the breath and blood of Christian living; the twin signs of life.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul’s appeal for believers to *present (their) bodies as a living sacrifice* means that we must remain aware, each day, that our body is the primary location where we actually express our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Over time, our choices and our actions cumulatively create a body of work, so to speak: like the body of evidence in a court case or an artist’s collection. This body of work is, essentially, the body Paul is talking about.

But, Paul also never forgets that we do not just exist as individuals in our individual bodies. We live as members of the body of Christ; and God enables that body to create its own body of work – prophecy, ministry, teaching, challenging

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<sup>1</sup> *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. X

and encouraging, giving, leading, and being compassionate. We can do at least some of these things alone, but we tend to do them with more discernment and impact as part of a larger body. None of us can do it all. Likewise, no single community can do it all. But God empowers each community – each body – to do all it is called to do in its context.<sup>2</sup>

Within the body of Christ – this term that Paul prefers to use to describe the church and its members – each member’s identity and essence becomes intertwined with the other. Our faith in God becomes our common denominator – rather than gender, nationality, or race; upbringing, status, or education. With God as the source, a transformed life is the engine that drives growth as a fellowship of believers.

We are called to a life that appreciates the diversity of gifts and talents through which the body of Christ can function as God intends. In humility, each part is invited to contribute what it can. Used in service to build the church, each part will be enriched, appreciated, and honored in his or her own reflection of God. One’s gifts find meaning in conjunction with the giftedness of others who seek to reflect Christ’s ways in today’s world.

Imagine, if you will, working with someone to move one of those large racks of folding chairs that populate church basements, gymnasiums, and fellowship halls – like ours. It requires a theory (“I think this will work best if you push from the back while I steer from the front”); you have to share at least elements of a vision, to be of “one mind” about the task and its execution.

Even so, as vital as it is, imagination does not move those chairs. It is action – pushing, pulling, stacking, and steadying – that is also required; as are mid-course communication and correction. The whole operation is a common work in which people with different functions share, if only for those few moments, the same mind, as a body.

Such shared imagination put-into-action does not ignore the difficulties of living with others. Chairs fall off the racks and tempers might flare (to say nothing of what can happen when church people set up the chairs and sit down for a meeting!) Paul knows the difficulties of living in community, and yet he refuses to resolve them by ranking some in church sanctuary or office or fellowship hall as being more important than others; or by imagining that being “gifted” in such a

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<sup>2</sup> Frank Crouch from *WorkingPreacher.com*

context means the same thing for everyone. In fact, it does not; by intentional design, the body includes members with vastly different gifts.

The one who designed the body of which we are now a part did not create a “smartest one in the room.” Even the imagination of such a one is a holdover from an old age. Ranking people like that relies on a sinful appeal to childhood playground insecurities. It belongs to a mindset that is conformed to this world.

By contrast, as those in Christ imagine and enact generosity, compassion, exhortation, and other such things together, we bear witness that our minds have transformed. By acting and imagining in the ways we do, our bodies declare what is true about us: that we belong to Christ, and we belong together.<sup>3</sup>

At this point, a Protestant voice inside you might be saying, “This sounds suspiciously like *works righteousness*.” However, what Paul describes here aims not at doing the things that lead up to salvation, but what flows out from salvation. Our actions, our ethics, do not earn salvation but lives it out in one’s body. In theological terms, it is sanctification following justification; it is redemption resulting in transformation.

The goal is to have a body – a body of work – that is a living, breathing, daily offering to God. “Sacrifice,” the word used in our translation, is misleading. In the first century, a proper act of worship often entailed the ritual slaughter of an animal – a dove, a sheep, or a bull. Paul suggests that the proper offering should still be an animal, but a human one; and not slaughtered but presented as a living offering. Because of God’s abundant mercy, therefore, present your life – your body of work – as an offering to God.

One day before the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual remembrance of 9-11, it can seem as if we are more divided than ever; that our thoughts and beliefs, even our sources of information are siloed into separate sides of a vast chasm. But, the vertical relationship between God and humanity, the offering of our living bodies – holy and acceptable – still has inextricable consequences for the horizontal relationships among people in and between our communities. Reaching out to and engaging with people who are different from us – listening to their stories and committing ourselves to the sometimes-difficult work of dismantling historical and systemic inequities – is a choice. It is up to us to make this a part of our body of work;

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Hinkle Shore, “We Belong Together”

learning to see the world through a wider lens and recognizing the gifts we have been given in order to contribute our part of the whole.

For Paul, seemingly, the body is the perfect metaphor for a Christian community; better than family or team. For, you can go on vacation without your family; you can take a break from being a member of a team; but you can't take a break from the parts of your body – or from the parts of your body of work.

When Paul proclaims, “You are the body of Christ,” he doesn't mean that the church literally is Christ's body in every way, so as to be without error or flaw. He, instead, means the church is a body that is in Christ; that we belong to Christ. The church is a body that gives Christ a face to the world, a voice of compassion, hands that help, and feet that walk alongside.

Our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ consist of a journey of transformation; from seeing ourselves as independent bodies to recognizing ourselves as members of the body of Christ. It is a process of living into our true identity: not as self-contained bodies, but as members of Christ's body; not as members who have (or feel that we should have) every gift to do it all alone, but who have been given (and accept with humility) that the work of the body requires more than we alone can offer.

We grow into this identity as we grow in empathy for other members of Christ's body. When another member suffers, we feel it, too, and offer encouragement and support. When we do not understand the thoughts or beliefs behind another member's actions, we work to listen and learn. And when more and more members of the group relate to one another in this way, the result is healthier body.<sup>4</sup>

To Paul, worship is full-bodied; it happens in community as we live out our faith by serving one another to build up the body of Christ. The quality of our worship is not measured only by our music and preaching, liturgy and prayers – by what happens on Sunday mornings – but, also, by what happens when we are together – as the body at work forming a body of work – each day of week. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Alyce Mckenzie from *Patheos.com*