

Go, Therefore... - 3. The Body of Christ

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

September 3, 2023

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

In 1984, after several days conducting military drills off the coast of California, the USS Palau was headed home. The massive aircraft carrier, large enough to transport 25 helicopters, was steaming into San Diego Harbor at a brisk clip. Inside the pilothouse, the mood was buoyant. Members of the crew would soon be disembarking and enjoying themselves on shore. Conversation turned to where they would go for dinner that night. Then, suddenly, the intercom erupted with the voice of the ship's engineer. The steam engines of the USS Palau had failed completely. This left the crew helpless to slow the rate of speed or to steer the ship. Quick action was needed to avert disaster but no one person had the key to stopping the runaway ship. By working together to read charts, calculate their ever-changing location minute by minute, and manually manipulating the helm, the captain, navigator, quartermaster chief and navigation team pooled their brawn and their brains to come up with some makeshift repairs. They saved the day by using their extended mind and varied gifts. No one single brain and no one single gift prevented the tragedy. It took all of them working together.

For years, we have honored the geniuses who appear to achieve great things on their own, whether they are working in science, the arts, business, or technology. But this idea of a lone genius is really a mostly a myth. The most successful minds in history have made their breakthroughs with the help of others. Michelangelo worked with a team of assistants to paint the Sistine Chapel. Albert Einstein analyzed the work of others at the Swiss patent office as he developed his own theories. And the apostle Paul? He lived in Corinth with a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, and they worked together as tentmakers. Can you just imagine the conversations they had over their sewing, as Paul prepared to argue in the synagogue and try to convince people to follow Jesus?

Science writer Annie Murphy Paul has written a book called *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain*. In it, she challenges us to tap into the intelligence that exists beyond our brains — in our bodies, in our surroundings, and in our relationships. Our thinking, which is often referred to as “cognition,” is improved by connections all around us. She argues that walking or exercising together can lead us to behave more cooperatively and be more successful in achieving shared goals. (slide) Morning calisthenics routines are broadcast over Japanese radio, and they are followed by people ranging from public school children to from Sony executives. These shared exercises create greater synergy and cohesion among members of the groups.

Reflecting on this book, psychologist Emily Balcetis says that “intelligence can be found, in part, in our brains, but perhaps even more importantly in our hearts and skin, in the architecture of the physical spaces we surround ourselves with and in our relationships.” This form of intelligence “isn't found in just one person but emerges as multiple minds collaborate.” She calls it “socially distributed cognition.” Socially distributed thinking. Not one brain, but an extended mind.

Although the apostle Paul was not a psychologist, he knew all about insight being found beyond the minds of individuals. “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters,” he wrote to the Corinthians, “I do not want you to be uninformed” (1 Corinthians 12:1). He wanted them to be fully informed about the way that the Holy Spirit was at work in their lives. The Spirit was not coming to them as isolated individuals, but as a community. It was offering them spiritually distributed cognition.

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit,” said Paul, “and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (vv. 4-7). There is one God, according to Paul, giving a variety of gifts to a variety of people. Together, these people form one body, with one extended mind. And the goal is the common good and fulfilling Jesus’ great commission... to go and make disciples of all nations.

Within Messiah Church today, we see this same example of different gifts at work in different people; the Spirit coming to us, not as isolated individuals but for the common good of the community. We know that we would be far less insightful, and far less effective, if everyone had the same spiritual gift. But even though we have a variety of gifts, we are one Christian community. “For just as the body is one and has many members,” said Paul, “and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” (v. 12). We are one Christian body, with socially and spiritually distributed cognition. We are given these gifts, not to be kept to ourselves or hidden away under a basket, but to be shared with the whole world.

So, it is the Spirit of God that is the activator, not us. And the Spirit activates some to sing in the choir or play in the band. The Spirit activates some to go to Africa and some to feed the hungry right here in our neighborhood. The Spirit activates some to meet for faith group Bible study, some to gather for book discussions, and some to teach children in Kids Street or serve in one of our youth ministries, to read with students at Oakwood school and others to build houses for Habitat for Humanity, and others give hope to the hopeless. The Spirit activates each of these efforts, and we would be a much less smart and much less effective church without them.

In this message series where we have been exploring and celebrating the ways Messiah Church listens to Jesus’ call to, “go, therefore...” In the first week, Sami helped us see the life-changing power of our youth in mission. Last week, Pastor Bethany helped us reflect and celebrate all the ways that you are at work in our communities and neighborhoods. Today, I want to wrap up this series by sharing with you three stories that illustrate how when we come together as one body, each of us use the unique gifts given to us by God, we make a greater kin(g)-dom impact.

First story. Over ten years ago, Messiah Church commissioned our very own Carol Erickson to follow God’s call on her life to go to Kenya and start a home for young, pregnant, single moms and their babies. And so Imara House was opened, a place where young moms can find a safe place to build a life, focusing on education, job and parenting skills and of course, faith. Just 2 weeks ago, Peggy Hermann returned home from her 4th visit to Imara and I asked her to share with us today some of the reasons she is passionate about serving these young girls as well as how she sees you, Messiah Church, using your gifts to make an impact. Here’s Peggy. <https://vimeo.com/859541011>

You are helping to change the lives of these young moms and their children and in some cases, literally saving their lives. You are making it possible for these precious children to have a future filled with hope. You do that by sharing your gifts, through your prayers, your mission trips to the Imara house, with your financial support and by sharing the Imara story with others. So many unique and special gifts, coming together to accomplish more than any one of us could do on our own.

Another story. Over the past many years, we have been witnesses to the devastating situations abroad where people have been forced to flee from their home countries because of persecution based on their identity—race, religion, ethnicity, membership in a social group, or political opinion. They are unable to return to their homes for fear of further persecution, imprisonment, or death. And so, they come and resettle in the United States by invitation of the US Department of State and they

are offered a direct path to US citizenship. They are authorized to work and remain in the US indefinitely.

Did you know that Minnesota has long been a leader in refugee resettlement and has welcomed more than 100,000 refugees since 1970. Today, most refugee arrivals to Minnesota are from Burma, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, and Ukraine. Refugees are survivors who bring hope and invaluable life experience to Minnesota.

Messiah Church first answered the call to come alongside a refugee family in 2018. Okunyi Agid and her 4 children arrived at the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport on a cold winter day in 2018 after living in a refugee camp in Kenya for 13 years. Messiah member, Jess Baker was (and still is) a part of that team. Here are some of her reflections on that experience.

In serving on the refugee settlement committee for the Agid Family, I was forced to examine preconceived notions about refugees and the process to come to the US in the first place. I was able to learn about political and cultural influences that cause and continue to create situations that necessitate the need for human migration and resettlement. However, I was also given the tremendous privilege of watching this incredibly bright and resilient family re-start their lives in a completely new place and transition from a place of needing near constant support to successfully building a future and realizing the goals that brought them to America in the first place. The entire team formed a lasting and caring relationship with the family that still continues to support them at times but is mostly now just celebrating their successes as friends.

A few months ago, some of the team members shared with me that Okunyi had been saving her money for quite a while with the goal of buying a used car so that she could return to work. She was so close to that goal but as you know, the cost of used cars just kept rising. So, because of your generous giving, we were able to come along side Okunyi with a small gift that made it possible for her to buy a used and safe car for her family. She has been wanting to say thank you to YOU for that gift and so I invited her to do just that today. Here's Okunyi. <https://vimeo.com/859784922>

My last story is about our second refugee family. In 2021, when the Taliban began taking control of Afghanistan, the Afghani people began fleeing their homeland for fear of their lives. In response to this humanitarian crisis, as we had done in the past, Messiah Church made the commitment to get involved and sponsor a family. Because of our previous and successful sponsorship of the Agid family, we were quickly approved and on boarded as sponsors. The invitation went out and in very short order, there were 20 of you raised your hand to serve on the second Messiah resettlement team, this time for the Amini family. Here's a reflection from some of the team members about that experience.

During their first several months in Minneapolis when we helped to drive Allahaddin to and from his work, we struggled to communicate. Now as we take him places and assist him with, his online English classes we can communicate quite well, which is a testament to his eagerness to learn English as well as the patient and frequent interactions with the dedicated members of the family's Messiah resettlement team. We find him to be an enjoyable and very grateful young man. In helping him, we have a new understanding and appreciation for the myriad of challenges an immigrant family faces when striving to integrate and find success in our country.

In the last 20 months in working with the Amini family, we have interacted with many resources and systems from health care, schools, grocery stores, and government agencies. EVERYWHERE we have gone with this family, they have been treated with respect and dignity from those we interact

with. Many people will say welcome to the US and some even talk about this family's courage of moving to a new country. They also thank the volunteers for helping the Amini's. That part of our experience has been amazing considering all the bad news we hear about our world. And yet, we've seen many people demonstrate God's love everywhere we go.

We have built a relationship based on trust and love. Allahaddin and Sadiqa see all of us as friends and have become a part of our family. Each of the Messiah resettlement team have been blessed to be a part of the Amini family's life and help them integrate and be successful in their new country.

These are just three stories about how you have shared your gifts and have made life better for others.

So, as you think back to the crew on the USS Palau, hurling towards the San Diego harbor, their goal was for the common good. Or the Japanese citizens who participate in coordinated morning calisthenics, their goal is for the common good. Or Paul's letter to the people of Corinth, his goal was for the common good. And thinking of you, the Messiah Church family, as you share our gifts in harmony with one another to serve Imara, the Amini or Agid family, or the next family or person yet to come or the person you've yet to meet or the cause that is tugging at your heart, our goal is for the common good as we go forth into the world and share the good news of Jesus Christ.

I leave you with this quote from pastor and author, Tony Campolo. "Jesus never says to the poor, "come find the church," but he says to those of us in the church, "go into the world and find the poor, hungry, homeless and imprisoned." So, go! Go forth into the world and be curious. Go forth into the world and wonder about the world and how you are called to share your gifts, in whatever way that might look for you. Take the risk, step out of your comfort zone, because that is where hearts and minds can grow and be changed. Jesus continually stepped outside of cultural expectations of the "right" people to serve and to be in fellowship with others. Yes, we have one Spirit, one faith, and one Lord Jesus. But the gifts of God are given to us in a variety of forms, so that we can be both smart and effective as we do God's work in the world. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 3, 2023

Weekly Prayer

God of all creation, my deepest desire is to glorify you. My deep delight is in your presence, my fondest thoughts are of you, my strongest longing is for your house. This week, help me to remember who I was created to be-- part of a community that breathes thankfulness and follows your call to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all the world. Amen.

Monday, September 4

Scripture: Matthew 28:19-20 and Revelation 21:1-5

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, "Look! God's dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his

peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.” He also said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

Observation

Jesus wasn’t “God with us” just for a few first century years. He pledged to remain with us in the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-18). In Matthew 28 he made the crucial promise that “I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.” The Holy Spirit is not a spooky, ghostly vapor, but the personal spiritual presence of Jesus with each of us every day, all the way to the end of the age. Beyond that, Revelation’s amazing symbolic visions said that by his life, death and resurrection Jesus made God’s presence with us a reality for all eternity. No matter what life throws at us, we, like those first Christians, can trust that THIS is where history is going: “He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Application

Jesus' followers, led by the apostle Paul, set out in the hostile Roman Empire to carry out Jesus' commission to “go and make disciples of all nations.” To some of his first European converts, Paul wrote that even in mourning Christians live very differently from those “who don’t have any hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Rome hated (and sometimes executed) Christians, yet from exile on the island of Patmos, John wrote of a vision that promised God’s people a splendid future, using images of the garden of Paradise from Genesis 2. The exiled seer invited everyone to choose that future: “Let the one who is thirsty come! Let the one who wishes receive life-giving water as a gift” (Revelation 22:17). Have you said yes to that invitation? Do you believe (in the words of the Apostles’ Creed) in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting with God?

Prayer

Jesus, God with us, you are already making me new. I can hardly wait for you to complete that work, for me and for our world. Fill me with your hope and energy this day and every day. Amen.

Tuesday, September 5

Scripture: Romans 8:35-39 and 1 John 4:7-8, 16

Who will separate us from Christ’s love? Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,

We are being put to death all day long for your sake.

We are treated like sheep for slaughter.

But in all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.

Dear friends, let’s love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn’t love does not know God, because God is love.

We have known and have believed the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.

Observation

The apostle Paul sent the Romans quite a list of things that might separate them from God's love: "trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword." He'd faced all of those, but he wrote the list to say, "In all these things we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us" (vs 37). That sweeping victory empowers us to love other people with the same tireless love which John said is God's very essence. John didn't say just that God loves us—God IS love. If our life and love ultimately reflect our creator's love then, there's power in love to help and heal when nothing else can. There's power in love to lift up and liberate when nothing else will. There's power in love to show us the way to live.

Application

The Greek agape was not emotional pop culture "luv", which can shift quickly. It was a chosen attitude. Believers are not to think love automatically goes on and on. It must also be supported by the exercise of the will. Love makes allowances. Love tries to help. Love looks at the good people do in preference to dwelling on their defects. How can you choose to love in that robust, tough-minded way? Paul asked, "If God is for us, who is against us?" and "Who will separate us from Christ's love?" His phrasing assumed the answer was "Nobody and nothing!" Your grace-filled promises can win a sweeping victory over all life challenges. Ask God to shape you into the kind of person able to live that way.

Prayer

All powerful God, whatever comes my way, keep me in the shelter of your love. Thank you that, through you, I can win a sweeping, loving victory in "all these things." Amen.

Wednesday, September 6

Scripture: Philippians 3:20 – 4:8

Our citizenship is in heaven. We look forward to a savior that comes from there—the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform our humble bodies so that they are like his glorious body, by the power that also makes him able to subject all things to himself.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

Loved ones, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to an agreement in the Lord. Yes, and I'm also asking you, loyal friend, to help these women who have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the scroll of life.

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise.

Observation

At times we may think our faith is just about the future (“Someday—if I’m good enough—I’ll be with my Savior in heaven”). In today’s reading, the apostle Paul clearly brought the future and present parts of our faith together. Scholar N. T. Wright wrote, “We naturally suppose he means ‘and so we’re waiting until we can go and live in heaven where we belong’. But that’s not what he says, and it’s certainly not what he means. If someone in Philippi said, ‘We are citizens of Rome,’ they certainly wouldn’t mean ‘so we’re looking forward to going to live there’. Being a colony works the other way round. The task of the Roman citizen in a place like Philippi was to bring Roman culture and rule to northern Greece, to expand Roman influence there. The church is at present a colony of heaven, with the responsibility (as we say in the Lord’s Prayer) for bringing the life and rule of heaven to bear on earth. Chapter 4 called (and calls) Christians to live as citizens of heaven right now.

Application

Being “citizens of heaven” doesn’t mean we don’t care what happens to this deeply troubled world we live in. Jesus didn’t shrug off people’s needs, saying, “Someday I’ll make them all better” (Matthew 4:23-24). Paul, Jesus’ committed follower, was in prison because he didn’t retreat to a quiet spot but traveled constantly, calling often-hostile citizens of the Roman Empire to the better life they’d have by making Jesus, not Caesar, their true Lord. Echoing the image of citizenship he used to the Philippians (who lived in a Roman colony city), he told another group of Christians, “We are ambassadors who represent Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20). In what ways are you living as an ambassador, a colonist seeking to bring the life and rule of heaven to bear on earth? How can you join with others in your congregation to carry out that mission?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, you’re not going to be my Savior and Lord “someday.” You save me today, with work for me to do for your kingdom. Give me your heart for this hurting world. Amen.

Thursday, September 7

Scripture: Hebrews 12:1-3

So then, with endurance, let’s also run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let’s throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith’s pioneer and perfecter. He endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God’s throne.

Think about the one who endured such opposition from sinners so that you won’t be discouraged and you won’t give up.

Observation

If you’ve ever been in US Bank Stadium or any college football stadium on game day, then you know just how loud a football crowd can be. The players know that the fans in the stadium can alter the outcome of a game so much that people often call them “the twelfth man.” At its best, the Christian family is awesome, too. We have the privilege of encouraging each other, bringing out the best in one another.

Application

In Hebrews 12:1 we read that “a great cloud of witnesses” surrounds us. This crowd is much more than just spectators making noise. Some consider this a reference to saints and angels observing us, as the crowd in a great stadium cheer on those on the playing field. Others see us observing the

saints of ages past, taking heart from their consistent testimony (witness) to God's faithfulness. How does the image of this great crowd of witnesses shape your daily behavior and speech?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I'm thankful I don't have to do this "faith" thing all alone. Thank you for the people, in history and in my day-to-day life, who encourage and cheer me on. Amen.

Friday, September 8

Scripture: 1 John 4:7-12

Observation-As John wrote about the relationships God wants Christians to have with one another, he likely remembered where he and Jesus' other disciples began. They competed with one another for position and recognition and got angry with each other if one person's efforts seemed to be gaining the upper hand (Mark 10:35-45). John knew from his own experience that loving others with Jesus' love doesn't just spring naturally from warm human feelings. It goes much deeper than just being "Minnesota nice." The ultimate source of this kind of active agape love is not us at all, but the eternally loving heart of God. The God of the universe loves us, and that is the reason we are committed to living with one another in love.

Application-An unknown humorist wrote, "To live above with saints we love—ah, that will be glory! To live below with saints, we know—well, that's another story." But John said that, in Christ, we need to grow beyond that very human kind of skepticism toward others. Which people, inside or beyond the church, do you find it hardest to love? Read and pray through this passage, plugging in their names and faces. Ask God to help you live out God's love even toward them. Then as your capacity grows, take in God's love to see yourself as loveable in God's sight, how is this changing the way you see and relate to others?

Prayer-Lord Jesus, let the people with whom I come in contact—yes, even the bored store clerk, the annoying neighbor or classmate—see you and your love in me. Amen.

Saturday, September 9

Scripture: Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Remember your creator in your prime,

before the days of trouble arrive,

and those years, about which you'll say, "I take no pleasure in these"—

before the sun and the light grow dark, the moon and the stars too,

before the clouds return after the rain;

on the day when the housekeepers tremble and the strong men stoop;

when the women who grind stop working because they're so few,

and those who look through the windows grow dim;

when the doors to the street are shut,

when the sound of the mill fades,

the sound of the bird rises,
and all the singers come down low;
when people are afraid of things above
and of terrors along the way;
when the almond tree blanches, the locust droops,
and the caper-berry comes to nothing;
when the human goes to the eternal abode,
with mourners all around in the street;
before the silver cord snaps and the gold bowl shatters;
the jar is broken at the spring and the wheel is crushed at the pit;
before dust returns to the earth as it was before
and the life-breath returns to God who gave it.

Perfectly pointless, says the Teacher, everything is pointless.

Observation

Ecclesiastes is narrated by a Hebrew known as Qoheleth (Hebrew “teacher”—maybe King Solomon, maybe not). If anything, the well-known King James version’s rendering of 1:2 (“vanity of vanities; all is vanity”) is too mild. Why should we spend any time with a book that feels like a cynical downer? As part of Israel’s “wisdom” literature, most of the book reminds us (often bluntly) of realities we’d rather ignore, like the fact that in this world everyone dies in the end, no matter how accomplished or notable. But even more important, while it begins with “perfectly pointless,” the book ends by affirming the one reality that is NOT pointless. “The closing verses advise, don’t lose track of the basics....of the faith expressed in Proverbs and Job. Be in awe of God. Express that commitment by doing what God says.

Application

Ecclesiastes refused to look at life in this world through “rose-colored glasses.” That may bother some of us; for others it offers refreshing honesty about life. And few of us get through life without having at least some moments when everything we work so hard for feels pointless. The Teacher is sometimes skeptical; but God is real to him, and he believes that God has revealed his will to humankind. If God had not done so, we could not be held accountable for our actions. Thus, although we may like to know more of the total plan of God, we know enough to be held responsible for what we do or fail to do. Our lives day by day must be lived as in the sight of God, who has given us the opportunity to fulfill his purpose for that day. How can you minimize your investment of yourself in activities Ecclesiastes called pointless? How can you apply Ecclesiastes’ insight about living each day to fulfill God’s purposes more fully in and through your life that day?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, so many things seem so important until something happens that shows me, they are

hollow and temporary. Keep my life rooted in worshiping and serving you, the one reality that lasts.
Amen.