

Date: February 14, 2010

Title: We Are the Body of Christ

Scripture: Romans 12: 1- 21

Romans 12:1-21 (MSG) ¹ So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life— your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life— and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. ² Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. ³ I'm speaking to you out of deep gratitude for all that God has given me, and especially as I have responsibilities in relation to you. Living then, as every one of you does, in pure grace, it's important that you not misinterpret yourselves as people who are bringing this goodness to God. No, God brings it all to you. The only accurate way to understand ourselves is by what God is and by what he does for us, not by what we are and what we do for him. ⁴ In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body. But as a chopped-off finger or cut-off toe we wouldn't amount to much, would we? So since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be, without enviously or pridefully comparing ourselves with each other, or trying to be something we aren't. If you preach, just preach God's Message, nothing else; ⁵⁶⁷ if you help, just help, don't take over; if you teach, stick to your teaching; ⁸ if you give encouraging guidance, be careful that you don't get bossy; if you're put in charge, don't manipulate; if you're called to give aid to people in distress, keep your eyes open and be quick to respond; if you work with the disadvantaged, don't let yourself get irritated with them or depressed by them. Keep a smile on your face. ⁹ Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. ¹⁰ Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle. ¹¹ Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, ¹² cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. ¹³ Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. ¹⁵ Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. ¹⁶ Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody. ¹⁷ Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. ¹⁸ If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. ¹⁹ Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it." ²⁰ Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. ²¹ Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

I wonder, do any of you like to put together a jigsaw puzzle from time to time? I like to do that about once every year or two. I don't like to do it all the time, because (Just ask Debbie) I get a little bit obsessive about it. I get to working on one part and then I want to get the next part and pretty soon hours have gone by, my back is screaming because of how I was hunched over the table but I put in another 15 pieces of the puzzle and I finally get to see what that one part looks like.

Over Thanksgiving and Christmas we put a puzzle together that came in a sack rather than a box so there was no picture to take clues from. I really missed having that box to checkout how one section was going to transition into the next section. You know what I mean, if you are putting one section together and you want to see how it flows into the next section, you sometimes look at the box for clues. If you don't have those clues it's a lot harder.

I think that the 12th chapter of Romans is a little bit like the picture on the box of a Jigsaw puzzle. The real puzzle is in the box and you have to work that out for yourself, but with the 12th chapter of this letter to the Romans, Paul gives us a pretty good idea of what the puzzle.... the puzzle of leading a good Christian life is going to look like when we finally get it put together.

Now, the thing about the puzzle Paul writes about is that we don't put it together like a regular puzzle. What I mean is we don't start by putting the frame together and then filling in the middle pieces. It is just the opposite. In the Christian life puzzle, we start by committing ourselves to live a life for God. We establish this as the starting point of the puzzle and then with the help of the Holy Spirit, we work our way out from there. Paul is saying that God wants us to live every part of our lives as an act of worship. That is every part, not just the part that shows up in church once or twice a week. And when we do this we undergo a transformation that moves us from who and what we are **now** to who and what God wants us **to be**. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it like this: "*You'll be changed from the inside out.*" I love that!

Paul tells us to begin putting the puzzle of living a good Christian life together by living our whole lives for God. When we do, something marvelous begins to happen. A transformation process begins and we start to become better people. We are not just another human taking up space in the world, we are being transformed according to God's plan. And just so we will know what to expect from this transformation, Paul gives us a bit of a list. He actually gives us 12 things that we should see as our lives change:

Humble yourself... love genuinely... hate evil... hold on to what is good...
honor others... don't be lazy... serve others... be hopeful... be patient when
you suffer... persevere in prayer... be hospitable.

Paul lists these 12 things as a way of giving us direction. It's not so much that we are to do these 12 things and all will be well, it is more that we are to allow the transformation

of God to take place in our lives and as we are transformed, we can use these 12 things as a way of checking our progress. Am I finding myself to be more humble? Am I honoring others well? Am I hopeful? Am I more patient? It's like we are living out the putting together to the puzzle, and we look at what Paul wrote as a way of making sure we are going in the right direction... sort of like checking the box cover to see if we are putting the puzzle together correctly.

Paul says we are not to live just like everybody else; we are to live with God's love first and foremost in our minds. And when we really do that, we can't help but to be transformed – *changed from the inside out* into women and men, boys and girls who live differently from those who have not yet begun to live their whole lives for God.

Paul is telling us that as we put the puzzle together in real life, our lives should look different from those people who let their particular culture blow them this way and that like an empty plastic grocery bag blowing in the wind. My life won't look just like yours or just like anybody else's for that matter; we are after all distinctly and wonderfully made individuals, but thanks to the words of Paul, we do have a box cover that gives us some clues as to how our transformed lives will look as the puzzle starts to come together.

So far, I've been talking about the puzzle as if it was all about what the individual will look like as the puzzle comes together. That is a big part of it, however there is another larger, more complicated puzzle that is coming together as well. This puzzle is called The Body of Christ.

Not only do the areas of our own individual lives need to come together but also each of our lives is meant to come together and connect with the lives of others as well. It's like the whole puzzle (the Body of Christ Puzzle) is coming together with all the wonderful and amazing people God has created in the world. They're all working together serving God and each other, and the Body of Christ puzzle is on one huge table coming together and growing.

But then let's just say that over in the corner there is this TV tray with someone's puzzle on it that is growing and getting all transformed from the inside out, but it never comes into the rest of the puzzle because it is so busy getting all transformed from the inside out. When that happens, there is a huge hole left in the Body of Christ puzzle. Oh, it can still function and it's not like it's going to parish, but without all of the pieces of the puzzle, the Body of Christ will not be all it could be. When someone is not participating it is real obvious that a part is missing. Each person is an important part of the Body of Christ; each has a part to play. Each has it's own specific talents, gifts and abilities which are designed to fit perfectly with someone else's talents, gifts and abilities. Two parts of the puzzle fit perfectly with two other persons and soon 4 becomes 8 and 8 becomes 16 and 16 becomes 32 and before you know it you have a divinely empowered body that is making a vital contribution to the transformation of the world.

Jesus lived this and taught this to his disciples. The Holy Spirit has been directing the process for centuries and we are involved in it as well. Paul observed the process in his own life and in the churches he was starting and wrote letters as a way of helping the process stay on track. Today, we are blessed to be able to read his letters as a way of checking our progress, both individually and as a corporate body. We are a part of the puzzle that will ultimately come together to reveal the Kingdom of God in all its glory and splendor.

So here is a question for you: How's your puzzle coming? Are you being transformed? Or are you just moving along with the rest of the culture letting it just sort of happen? I know it can be hard; especially if you haven't been checking the box cover to see how you're doing. Maybe you weren't even aware that there is a box cover that can help us know what the puzzle is supposed to look like. However it is for you, I hope you will give the box cover some attention. This decision to live completely for God is at the heart of our transformation into a Kingdom of God life. And the transformation that touches each one of our lives has a dramatic effect on the effectiveness of this church. Together we are the Body of Christ and together we are allowing the Holy Spirit to use us to usher into existence the Kingdom of God on this earth.

This is a puzzle that doesn't just come together by itself; we have to work at it. We have to make ourselves available to the workings of the Holy Spirit as we intentionally

- read our scriptures,
- diligently pray separately and together,
- worship God together, and
- serve God by serving each other,

We do all of this so that we will be transformed individually and as a church for the work of God. If we don't do all of this we might as well just look at the picture on the cover of the puzzle box and think about how nice it would be if we were ever actually able to put it together. But you know... it's not the same... it's not the same as really living it out.

Life is a puzzle. There is no question about that. But with some effort; with the help of the Holy Spirit; with the help of each other – working from the inside out... I'm convinced that each one of us can find our place in the puzzle. Amen.