

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – August 4th, 2024
BEING THE BODY

Prayer

Lord, help us to understand our individual roles as members of your body and enable us through your grace to work in unity to build that body up into maturity.

AMEN

A Worthy Life

Paul starts out today's Epistle reading by praying that his readers, his congregation, would act worthy of their new nature (verses 1-3). He does this knowing full well that they will fail – just as you and I have failed.

Reflect on your answers to these questions:

Are there times when you've been so proud of your accomplishments that you either look down upon others or say that it's all your doing, without giving God His due?

Have any of your spoken or acted harshly to a brother or sister, parent or child, coworker or friend?

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Have any of you ever lost your patience with a student who just didn't get it, a less than competent customer service representative, a classmate who refused to share a toy or play fair, or a coworker who just wasn't a team player?

And what about making allowances for each other's faults? I'll confess that I'm more likely to point out where someone needs improvement faster than I'll compliment them on an area of strength.

If we're honest with ourselves, the Law has done its job and we can agree that we have FAILED and not lived up to a life worthy of our calling, since our Holy God asks nothing less of us than perfection.

An Unhealthy Body

If we fail as individuals, how do we fare, as the body of Christ? Just as badly.

Medical doctors call the condition where our mortal body is fighting itself an autoimmune disorder. If any of you have had one on of these or know of someone who does, it wreaks havoc with the body and can even be life threatening. The same things can be said when the body of Christ, the church, be it an individual congregation or a whole

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denomination, fight among themselves. Even if the fight is important, such as the fight within the LCMS some fifty years ago over the inerrancy of scripture, the hurt and scars remain for many years. And just think about what such infighting does to our witness to our neighbors and to our community.

Just like our physical bodies grow old and decayed, so do some parts of the body of Christ – just look at the statistics for how many congregations of the LCMS can't afford a pastor or whose members are growing older, their building decaying along with them, just waiting for the last parishioner to die before the caretakers turn off the lights.

Finally, our bodies are prone to accidents – things we don't expect or anticipate. We slip, we fall, we get cut, burnt, break bones, and so on. While not completely analogous, the Body of Christ can suffer when the unexpected happens – such as when a pastor retires, an earthquake damages the building, or the state decides to extend free education to preschool age children. While accidents tend not be deadly, recovery times can stretch on for months or even years.

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Despite and even because of all our failures and frailties, Christ indeed descended to the earth (verse 9); He took on our flesh in His incarnation. And in that flesh, lived a perfectly Holy life, was unjustly killed by crucifixion, and then rose from the dead after three days. All this He did to pay the deadly penalty for those failures, allowing me to remind you on a weekly basis that your sins have been forgiven.

Every Part is Important

Continuing with the analogy of the body, I want each of you to realize that YOU are critical to the proper function of the Body of Christ. The Christian body has no appendix – no useless parts. I ask you to reflect and to ask yourself about what role you play within the body and how what you do relates to those around you.

But again, I want to reiterate that this isn't a matter of forcing a square peg into a round hole. As I spoke about last week, it's through prayer, reflection, trying and failing, as well as the mutual consolation and support of the brethren that all of us begin to clarify our roles and then actually do the good works that God has prepared for us to do in HIM.

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Whatever our role, we should find joy and satisfaction in it; if you're not, consider doing something different.

Role of the Pastor

Paul also identifies some members of the bodies by name and function (verses 11 and 12):

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ

Note that it doesn't say that these people – call them the professional church workers – are to **do** the ministry, as if the entire work of ministry has been delegated to them by the congregations; no, it says that these people are called to **teach, train, and equip** the rest of the body for the work of the ministry. If we stick with the picture of the body, maybe they are the blood that delivers the oxygen and nutrients to every other part of the body, both to enable growth and to sustain health.

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Now there are some functions that, for the purpose of good order in public worship, the congregation has delegated to Pastors, namely the preaching of Law and Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. In private, we can and should verbally say the words "I forgive you," in cases of emergency, anyone can expand God's family by baptizing someone else, and parents are called to be teachers within their families.

The God for the Head!

How many of you heard the phrase "running around like a chicken with it's head cut off?" The body of the chicken does continue to function for a short time without it's head, but then it stops.

The church is like that as well, without Christ as the head, we can continue to function without purpose, but soon die.

As our head, I can think of at least three things that Jesus does for us, His Body.

He rules, governs, and directs His body. Just like the brain in our head tells the rest of the body what to do, so Christ directs the function of each of the members of His body.

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He set the rules for how the body operates. In His role in creation, He set in order the complex interaction between the parts of our physical bodies and the universe in which we find ourselves. Similarly, as head of the church, He has told us how we are to interact with our physical world as well as those outside the body – those who have yet believed.

Finally, through the work of the Holy Spirit at our Baptism, He gives us the gifts and abilities that are the exact ones we need to excel at those works that He has indeed prepared beforehand for us to do.

And it's through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, in both Word and Sacrament, that we have the faith to believe the promises of God that our sins are forgiven and that, like the little child, be assured that our Heavenly Father will take care of us and, to quote one of my favorite podcasters, "Everything is going to be OK."

AMEN