

St. Paul's Ev. Lutheran Church—Muskego, WI
Sermon for August 22-24, 2009
Main Text: Romans 12:3-8
Theme: Be the Body

While I was in Denver back in June, I ran through a new neighborhood that had once been the old Stapleton airport. The entire neighborhood is brand-spanking new, but it looks like a 1950s neighborhood. All the houses have front porches—reminiscent of the days when people would sit out front and greet their neighbors as they walked by. There are no privacy fences—you cannot hide from your neighbors. If you don't have the curtains pulled tight, and you like to walk around in your SpongeBob boxers, it's a neighborhood affair.

This type of neighborhood, I've found out, is becoming more and more popular, especially with young families. In our broken world where so many people feel like they don't know anybody, don't live near family, where the speed of life creates very shallow relationships—people long for community.

Many years ago, Jesus traveled through his own neighborhoods by the Sea of Galilee. And the scripture notes, **“When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36).**

When Jesus looked out at the people around him, he *saw* something we don't normally see. He saw *beneath* the surface. He saw deep into people's lives. And what he saw was sadness, confusion, brokenness, heartache and pain. He saw the unmerciful chains of addiction. He saw people wandering and in danger—sheep without a shepherd—desperately needing the God who longed to guide and provide for them.

And Jesus “had compassion on them”—literally Jesus was moved in his gut. It just tore him apart inside.

When you look out at the people you live and work around, what do you *see*? Do you see people who, for the most part, seem to be doing OK? They drive decent cars, have decent houses; they have all the friends and family they need. It looks like they don't really need anything.

Sometimes we don't have time to truly *see* other people. We've got more than enough of our own issues. Then there are the people we really don't *want* to see—you know, the people that annoy us. They don't drive right, they cut in line; they say and do the dumbest things. If only Jesus hadn't said: love God AND love others. If only he had said, “Love God and love your cat or dog.” Some people are really hard to love.

What if we *saw* the people we interact with every day as Jesus sees them—not just on the surface, but underneath all the pretense that says, “I have it all together”? What would we *see*? Well, consider the statistics:

- Nearly one of two people spend more money than they have. People are racking up debt burdens from which they'll never fully recover.
- One of two marriages fail—leaving a trail of heartache and pain for adults and children alike.
- Two of five people under age forty are chained to some addictive substance, struggling to get free, but more often feeling helpless and hopeless.

- One of four women are sexually abused before age eighteen, and then struggle with all kinds of coping mechanisms that leave them feeling isolated and alone.
- One of two men and one of three women will likely get some form of cancer over their lifetime.
- One of four people you see, coming and going each day, if they were honest would tell you they have “no close friends” at all—no one to talk things over with, no one who cares.

Just about everybody you lock eyes with more than likely is struggling with something, or soon will be. Do we have eyes to see what Jesus sees?

A member once confided that she had been too busy to get to know her neighbor. One evening she saw an ambulance and fire truck at the neighbor’s house. The next day she took a meal over but no one answered. She tried again the next day and still no answer. Finally she ran into another neighbor who told her that it was a widower who lived there by himself and he’d had a heart attack and died. She felt bad...she had no idea who he was or what his story was, and now it was too late.

God sees it all—all the broken, messed-up garbage hidden beneath the surface of our lives. And his gut-twisting compassion couldn’t just sit back and do nothing about it. His love for us moved him to do something far beyond anything we could have ever imagined. God came down from heaven, took on a human body, and entered our suffering. All the pain, the hell, that should have been ours, he took it all as he hung on the cross. He died to pay the price for our sin so that, no matter who we are or what we’ve done, the darkness and suffering of this world would be overshadowed by the hope of eternal joy.

Bringing everyone to heaven through faith in Christ—that’s God’s big plan. Yet while Jesus was here in flesh and blood, think about how much of his life was spent wading neck-deep in people’s real-life, here and now, pain and problems—casting out demons, healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. Jesus saw this as an important part of his mission.

Today Jesus is no longer with us bodily. But certainly his compassion for the world hasn’t changed. So what is his plan? What is he doing today to break down the walls that keep people alone and isolated, hurting and hating, tearing apart families, imprisoned in addictions and separated from what they need the most—the assurance of God’s love? He’s using his body... and that body is you and me.

Romans 12 gives a picture of God’s plan: **“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us” (Romans 12:4–6).**

Jesus’ plan is to represent himself through you and me together functioning as his body, made up of our diverse gifts, abilities, passions, and stories. As God prophesied through Jeremiah, he is creating something new—a body to work through, real live hands and legs, eyes and mouths through which he can tangibly show the world his grace, love and compassion.

Listen to Paul’s description of the Church from Ephesians 4: **“¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.” (Eph 4:15–16).**

You are a part of Christ’s body. Living as the body starts with a simple prayer: “God I want to see with your eyes.” Every day, you interact with people who have needs that God wants to meet. Jot down the names of a few of these people in a convenient place. Then pray this week:

“God, help me to see ? with your eyes.” You can’t be the body until you see what the rest of the body needs.

Sometimes we don’t want to see people’s needs because they overwhelm us. We hear voices telling us, “You can’t do anything about that,” or “They’ll think you’re weird if you ask.” Other times we throw up our hands and say, “I’m just one person. I can’t solve the world’s problems. I don’t know how to help a struggling single mom, I can’t fix an addict, I don’t know how to counsel a depressed person, I can’t solve someone’s financial crisis, I can’t eradicate poverty and injustice, I don’t know how to answer people’s spiritual questions or give someone hope.”

You’re not alone. Paul says that we are a body. Not only that, Jesus is the head of the body. You don’t have to figure everything out. You don’t have to meet everyone’s needs—no one can do that, not your pastors, not anyone in the church. It’d be overwhelming! But if you’ll be willing hands responding to the head of the body, the Greatest Mind in the Universe will coordinate the rest.

In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul says: **“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Co 12:21–23, 26–27).**

God’s plan is that we would no longer see ourselves as independent, isolated silos of self-will, but as uniquely gifted, interdependent parts of his body. Our sin—our self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness—destroys God’s body. It causes us to think too highly of ourselves and look down on others, like we don’t need them. Or it causes us to be so preoccupied with ourselves not being good enough that we take ourselves out of the game. Or, like an autoimmune disease it causes us to fight and divide and destroy the body.

God forgive us for Christ’s sake and rescue us from ourselves!

We need each other to be the body. You may not know how to help someone overcome an addiction, but you’re connected to someone in this body who does. You may not know how to help a single mom in crisis with kids and loads of bills—but you’re connected to a body with all sorts of women who have been there, to a body that shares generously of their financial resources to help those in true need. You may not know how to help a couple in marital crisis—but there are couples here who definitely can. You may not know how to help someone with tough spiritual questions—but you’re connected to a body with a connector group ministry that gives people a comfortable environment to ask those questions and explore the answers with other Christians.

That’s really the purpose of Connector Groups...to give God’s people the opportunity to be the body of Christ, to get to know people deeper than our normal superficial relationships and then be there for them, pray for them, encourage them, support them in difficult times, hold them accountable, and they, in turn, will do the same for you.

My friends, there is no better way to carry out our mission of bringing everyone closer to Christ than by simply being the body of Christ. When we take the initiative to be there for people, we create opportunities to witness what Jesus means to us. Peter says: **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).**

When you've found hope in Christ ... you just tell people what you've found. As one person said, "It's like one beggar telling another beggar where he can find bread." When you've found hope, you point others to the one who gives hope eternally. When they're hungry, they'll eat. If not, you respect them and let God work on their hearts a little longer.

The point is, if we will be a church of people who live in a new way with each other, who show compassion for others in tangible ways, and then are willing to tell them of the hope we've found in Christ with gentleness and respect—God's Spirit will lead many people to discover through us grace and hope and freedom in Christ.

There's a beautiful example of the body at work here at St. Paul's. Last year when a family suddenly and tragically lost their father and husband all kinds of people stepped forward to help. Spearheaded by a small group, people from the congregation provided meals for the family, childcare when needed. Volunteers from the church helped fix up the house. Many others contributed financially. All these different parts of the body saw the need, took the time, and carried another part of the body through a very difficult time.

I know at this very moment this story is probably being multiplied a ten times over in this church, as you the body are reaching out with Jesus' love and compassion...what will you personally do this week to multiply the story, 10, 12, 50 times over?

Please pray with me: "God I want to see with your eyes, reach out with your hands, and be the body. I'll do what I can, but I'll also connect people to other parts of the body—so you can do your work through us all." Amen.

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