

# Sermons on 1 Corinthians:

## Bodily Functions (1 Cor 12:21-26)

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A stinking foot, a drippy nose and a rumbling intestine—are they gross body parts or just part of the Body? In 2002, Sylvia Branzei published a popular children’s book entitled: *Grossology: The Impolite Science of the Human Body*. Now, there is a traveling exhibit going to children’s museums around the country. *Grossology* combines humor, colorful visual displays and hands-on-learning with various bodily functions. The end result is that natural childhood curiosity and humor are met with legitimate scientific education.

Visiting the *Grossology* exhibit will give you quite an education. Turn the handle on the “Vomit Center” machine and watch the process of stomach acid coming back up the digestive track. Trust me when I say there are many other “hands-on” learning experiences one can have at the *Grossology* exhibit.

But, the exhibit’s real aim is not to gross people out, but advance interest in anatomy and science among kids. Denver Museum of Science and Nature curator Bridget Coughlin upholds the educational value of displaying these bodily functions when she says: “I wanted to make sure that in the brightly colored paint and gross factoids, there are real, deep scientific lessons that we’re teaching our youngest visitors. I am wholly satisfied that we are.”

But, it isn’t just children who are interested in bodily functions—the Apostle Paul is quite interested in them himself. The problem in Corinth, as we have been discussing, is that the brethren there were quite independent. In fact, they were far too independent. There was no functioning as a body, no common concern. On the other hand, they were boasting that their functions were more important than the functions of others.

In this morning’s text, Paul seems to write to two groups. Paul writes to those boasting in their gifts, and he explains that in the body each part is dependent on every other part. In order for the body to be whole, the parts of the body must work in unison. Furthermore, Paul writes to those who were being made to feel inferior. Can you imagine walking in here this morning and being looked down upon simply because you

could heal rather than speak in tongues? What would it be like to assemble every Sunday with folks who felt you weren't worthy to be around them? How would you like to hear me preach this morning and declare, "I am so great and wonderful because God has blessed me so richly. But you folks are nothing but a bunch of little losers because you can't do all the things I can do"? The brethren at Corinth did not need to imagine such treatment, for that treatment was their reality.

Paul makes the point throughout this paragraph that even those body parts that we don't think are that important are essential. Paul informs these brethren of A COMMON DEPENDENCY, A COMMON DESIGNER, & A COMMON DEFERENCE.

## **A COMMON DEPENDENCY, v 21.**

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

What Paul says here isn't exactly true of the physical body, is it? How many people have we known—whether through accident, illness, or defect—lacked a non-essential part of the body—an appendix, an eye, a leg, or an arm? Bonnie Consolo was born without arms. In the 1970's, a film crew followed her and developed a documentary, *A Day in the Life of Bonnie Consolo*. In the documentary, Consolo is shown cooking, canning fruit, driving, shopping, killing a fly, putting on a necklace, cutting her son's hair, and then hugging him—all with her feet.

Although our physical bodies can function without certain parts, the body of Christ is not designed the same way. Each part depends on every other part to make it whole. Consistent with Paul's use of the body metaphor elsewhere, here he uses the metaphor to speak of the body's wholeness. "We, though many, are one body in Christ" (Rm 12:5). Concerning the division between Jew & Gentile, Paul writes, Jesus abolished "the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross" (Eph 2:15-16).

In that way, what Paul writes here fits beautifully. Even though Bonnie Consolo learned to compensate quite remarkably for the absence of her arms, the fact remains that she was missing arms. No matter how well disabled individuals compensate, no matter how much medical technology and service animals allow them to live full lives, part of the body is missing.

We mentioned last week the need we have as a body to work in unison to accomplish the Lord's work. While that is so very true, as it was true in Corinth, is on the interdependence of believers—We need one another. The eye cannot say to the hand, nor can the head say to the feet that they do not need each other. Because God, in his wisdom, knew that we would so often need each other, his Word repeatedly encourages his children to assist one another. "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor" (Rm 12:10). "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill

the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2).

Is it not true that we often need one another deeply? Does not even the greatest encourager at times need to be encouraged himself? Does not even the most learned teacher sometimes need to be taught? Does not even the most devout lady who never fails to mention anyone in prayer sometimes need prayer herself?

To that end, John Donne wrote, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less.” Not only, as Donne argues throughout his meditation, are all humans interconnected, but the body of Christ is interdependent. Are we serving one another?

## **A COMMON DESIGNER, vv 22-24.**

“The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it.”

The parts appearing to be weaker are indispensable. It only appears that these parts are weaker. In reality, they aren't weaker at all. It's not exactly clear what physical parts Paul references here; however, most believe he references two sets of organs: delicate organs (such as the eye) and internal organs (such as the heart). The eyes are in some ways indispensable: while we could learn to compensate without them, like so many have, there's not a one of us who would have driven here this morning without them. We all know how indispensable the heart is: while artificial hearts and heart transplants have come a long way, there's no substitute for a healthy ticker.

Both the strong and weak in Corinth needed this lesson. The strong needed to understand that those members they despised were indispensable to them, and the weak needed to know that they were indispensable to the strong. I pray that we don't need this lesson as much as the Corinthians did, but sometimes I'm afraid we do. Maybe we think that if we have many talents, we're better than others: If I'm upfront during the service, I'm better than those folks who get stage fright, if I teach Bible class, the church needs me much more than someone who can't do that, or if I do this or that, the church can't do without me. Maybe some of us think the opposite: I'm not as good as those who stand up front, teach Bible class, or do any other myriad of public, recognizable service.

The following words appeared in a Christian publication in 2004: “A young father became noticeably more patient with people after a little girl came into their home who was seriously mentally and physically handicapped. The doctors told the father and mother that she would be with them for only a few years. she lived to be 6 years old. In those brief years as he suffered with her, she worked her way into his heart and life to an unusual degree. As he reached out in tenderness to her, his heart became more and

more tender toward all and particularly toward those who suffered. He may not have been conscious of the change that took place in his life, but his friends were definitely aware of it.” That little girl was weak, so weak, in fact, that some have called for euthanasia in such cases. Yet, she played a very valuable role in her father’s life. Likewise, in the body of Christ, apparently weak parts play indispensable roles.

On those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. It is quite obvious that Paul here speaks of those body parts that we euphemistically call “private parts.” We give those parts great modesty, don’t we? Who among us doesn’t wear more clothing over our “private parts”? Who among us hasn’t taught our children from a very early age, “Those are private. You keep it that way”? Paul’s point is quite obvious: If we give more attention to our less honorable and unpresentable physical body parts, how can we not give deference and concern to all of our brothers and sisters regardless of spiritual gift?

Notice what Paul says God has done: “God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body.” A hallmark of Paul’s writings is that sometimes you don’t know where he stops a metaphor and makes application. That is certainly the case here. Is the body under discussion in this sentence the church as the body of Christ or the human body? It really makes no difference, for Paul is using one to explain the other. In the human body, God has given greater honor to the part that lacked it. The private parts of the human body have been given great honor by God, for they are the parts that relate to the most beautiful of all human experiences: reproduction. In fact, those parts relate to the very first command God gave mankind: “God said to them [Adam and Eve], ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (Gn 1:28). In the Body of Christ, God has given greater honor to the part that lacked it. Has God not greatly blessed the humble in his body? We know that he has: “He who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Lk 9:48). “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (Js 4:10).

The important point here is that God has composed the body. God designed the body as he chose. It wasn’t up to me or you to get the gifts God bestowed upon us; it was God’s will that gave us our gifts. The design of a particular human body is fundamentally encoded in DNA. Because of DNA, the human body is much the same from person to person, but at the same time there are a zillion individual variations that determine our height, weight, skin color and aspects of our personality. The variations within our DNA do not make us any less human than any other person.

We can’t choose the variations in our DNA. We had no choice about the family into which we were born or what color our eyes would be or how tall we would end up. Likewise, we can’t choose our spiritual gifts. It’s another form of DNA: Designed Not Asked. It’s his choice, not ours.

## **A COMMON DEFERENCE, vv 25-26.**

God designed the body as he did “that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

Instead of a divided body, the members have the same care for one another. We know how true that is in our physical bodies. Our kidneys drain toxins, our lungs bring in needed oxygen, our hearts pump nutrient-rich blood to other parts of the body, and our digestive system provides the body’s energy. It’s not possible to survive if those organs quite functioning altogether.

Likewise, God intends that same deference to be in the spiritual body. If you have the gift of encouragement and I have the gift of teaching, you can encourage me in my teaching and I can teach you to use your gift more appropriately; if you have the gift of leadership and I have the gift of mercy, you can help me find the best ways to use my gift and I can minister to you in your time of trial. In such cases, we would truly be showing the same care for one another.

If one member suffers, all suffer together. Again, we understand the physical truth here quite well. If one part of your body is in pain or infected, you’re not going to feel good from head to toe. The same is likewise true of the spiritual body. The Corinthians needed this lesson desperately: they could not, as true members of the body, make other members of the body feel inferior without consequence. We need to live that way as well, don’t we? “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rm 12:15). “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body (Heb 13:3).

During the reign of Queen Victoria, she once heard that the wife of a common laborer had lost her baby. Having experienced deep sorrow herself, she felt moved to express her sympathy, so she called on the bereaved woman one day and spent some time with her. After she left, the neighbors asked what the Queen had said. “Nothing,” replied the grieving mother. “She simply put her hands on mine, and we silently wept together.” Do we as a body weep together?

Likewise, if one part is honored, all rejoice together. To go back to the reproduction, you ladies know this principle quite well. As you bear a baby, your whole body is operating differently in order to help that child grow. A woman’s body was designed much differently than man’s to allow for reproduction: a woman has a longer trunk that does a man; women have larger kidneys, liver, and stomach, but smaller lungs than men. It makes perfect sense when you stop to think about it: a woman’s body was designed for this honor.

Likewise, as a body of Christ, when one part receives honor, we all rejoice together. The Corinthians who lacked some spiritual gift didn’t need to feel inferior, but they had every reason to rejoice with those who had those gifts. As Paul and Barnabas were on their way to the Jerusalem Conference, “they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers” (Acts 15:3). These Jewish believers had never met these Gentile converts,

yet they rejoiced with their brethren in the body of Christ. Do we rejoice with our brethren?

Our human bodies may have functions that are gross, impolite to talk about, stuff that's just better left unsaid. But, the body of Christ, when functioning as God designed it, is something to behold! This text reminds us that who we are individually will determine what the church is becoming collectively. It's not gross. It's beautiful. Are you part of that body this morning?