

*Abundant Life: Community*  
 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 CEB  
 October 29, 2023  
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<sup>12</sup> Christ is just like the human body—a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many. <sup>13</sup> We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. <sup>14</sup> Certainly the body isn't one part but many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? <sup>16</sup> If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? <sup>17</sup> If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. <sup>19</sup> If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? <sup>20</sup> But as it is, there are many parts but one body.<sup>21</sup> So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you."<sup>22</sup> Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. <sup>23</sup> The parts of the body that we think are less honorable are the ones we honor the most. The private parts of our body that aren't presentable are the ones that are given the most dignity. <sup>24</sup> The parts of our body that are presentable don't need this. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the part with less honor <sup>25</sup> so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it.

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Our family went camping recently. It was our first time tent-camping with the kids in several years. We'd always borrowed tents before, but I decided that this was a good time to buy our own tent. We were, of course, running late the afternoon we drove out to Camp Powhatan, so we arrived after dark, and we had, of course, committed the cardinal sin of not setting up this entirely brand-new tent even once in our own yard to figure out how it all worked together. So, we were in the dark trying to set up a big tent we knew nothing about.

This was a scouting trip, so we were surrounded by literal scouts who are, of course, always prepared. And, of course, several of them, seeing us struggle, very kindly offered to help. Some of them even had our exact tent already set up. But did we accept any of those offers? No. No, we did not. I didn't even consider saying yes when they offered. The "No, we're good! Thanks!" was automatic. That value of independence, self-sufficiency runs deep—deeper than common sense in our case.

This may be a particularly pronounced dynamic for us today, but it's not actually new. In this letter to the early church in Corinth, Paul addresses it directly, and he develops this stunning metaphor of community being a body.

The metaphor is so good because we automatically get how absurd it is for a foot to feel bad about not being a hand, or to imagine a body that's just an enormous ear. One of our favorite family games, that I'm sure lots of you have played, too, is "Would You Rather?" We've got a whole set of cards with would you rather questions. Some of my favorites are "Would you rather have arms for legs or legs for arms?" Give it a minute. Seriously. Which would you prefer? Or along the same lines, "Would you rather not have elbows or not have knees?"

Our bodies are whole—even if they’re created differently or called disabled—they are a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. There’s no such thing as a self-sufficient head.

Paul says this is how community in Christ is. Someone once said to me, “You can’t be Christian by yourself.” That really rubs some of us the wrong way in our time of independent spirituality. But the truth is, we need each other if we want to know God. It doesn’t have to be a big community. Jesus said two or three will do. But we cannot do it alone. The idea that we could is an illusion. We are intertwined whether we believe it or not.

From the very smallest bits imaginable to the vast expanses of the cosmos, the physicists tell us it’s all connected. I’m not a physicist. At all. But some of you are. I’d heard of quantum entanglement and emailed a couple of the actual physicists in our congregation to ask about it. I understood less than half the explanation, but the part that grabbed my heart was when one of them wrote, “One thing I think we can say somewhat confidently about ‘entanglement’ is that really those things aren’t entangled, they are part of the *\*same\** system. The *\*same\** thing. They’re not entangled, ...they’re manifestations we can measure of some [real] underlying unity.” In other words, I think, these particles that seem separate, aren’t. Separation is an illusion.

Venturing out of my lane again, the entomologists among us could explain how this works with bees or ants. Each is somehow an independent creature. Sort of. Because they are also inextricably part of the hive, the colony. As I’ve witnessed in my own kitchen, there’s no such thing as one ant.

This is true at an even deeper level in our own bodies than Paul ever imagined. The human body contains trillions of microorganisms. Microorganism cells actually outnumber human cells in our bodies by 10 to 1. Let that sink in. They’re teeny, so they only make up something between 2 and 6 pounds of an adult’s weight. But think about that—we have *pounds* of microorganisms in us. I am not comfortable with that, but whether I like it or not, it’s real, and we can’t survive without those pounds of microbes.<sup>1</sup> There is no such thing as an independent human body.

Even the human cells in our bodies aren’t always all our own. When a person is pregnant, they exchange cells with the fetus. The transfer goes both ways, and even decades later, their cells can be found in each other’s bodies. Where do I end, and you begin?

Our hearts take up the rhythm of the people around us. When we sleep near someone, our hearts beat in time. When we sing together, they harmonize. They even synchronize in people who are far apart but listening to the same story or poem. This happens every single week when we come here and sit next to one another, speak together, listen together, and especially when we join our breath and sing together. Our hearts know the truth—we belong to each other.

And—and this is where I think Paul gets really radical—Paul says that in our interconnection, our interdependence, we *are* Christ’s body. The church is not perfect. Every one of us can tell a story that testifies to that. But, even so, says Paul, we are, all of us together, the body of Christ, a manifestation of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-human-microbiome-project-defines-normal-bacterial-make-up-body>.

We need each other, and there's no shame in that. Our society sure tells us differently. We celebrate the pioneer, the self-made man, the pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps story. But that is not the gospel. It's needing one another that makes us the body of Christ.

It's not about all of us being the same. There are more than 10,000 different microbial species in us. We need all of them. So, too, with the body of Christ. We need every single sacred manifestation of the image of God if we are going to be whole.

One of the terms I really wrestle with in education is the word "gifted," as in, "academically gifted." As if there could be a brain that isn't gifted. Different brains learn best in different ways, but there's no such thing as a non-gifted brain. Some of us are good with words, and others of us better with numbers, and still others of us are good with our hands. Some of us understand yeast, and others soil, and others human emotion. Some of us hear the world in harmony, and others of us see the world in color, and still others of us know the world in our bodies. We need linear and non-linear thinkers. We need people who communicate verbally, and nonverbally, silently with signs, and with the assistance of computers. We need big-picture folks and detail folks. There is no brain that is not gifted. There is nobody we don't need.

I hope this can be a community where we know we need each other, where we know we need everybody. We need y'all who've been here for more than seventy years, and y'all who walked in today for the very first time and are planning to slip out as fast as you can through a side door. We need you. We need y'all who are deep skeptics who ask the hard questions, and y'all who are steady and sure. We need y'all who seem to get along with everyone, and y'all who feel like you're always the lone voice of dissent. We need all y'all. We need each other. We are not whole without each other. Whether we like it or not, it's reality.

I hope this is a community where we don't have to pretend that we know how to set up the tent, where we can acknowledge we don't have it all together, where we can fall apart into one another, where we can admit we need each other. And here's what's amazing: The gospel says our need for one another *is* our abundance. Our need is not a shortcoming. It's abundant life. It is nothing less than the presence of Christ in the world.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023