

Beach Body of Christ

Salem United Methodist Church

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Alright my friends, its that time of year!

Its time to get into the gym, back to the diet, start running because its time to get our bodies into shape for the beach! Right?

Or, at least that's what the advertisements start to tell us around this time. Bathing suits are back in stores. Pool memberships are available, or will be available soon. People are setting their vacation plans if they haven't already. Soon our visual field will be filled with models in suits, big hats, and umbrellas over their shoulder as they stroll down to the beach.

These pictures always have the same message, right? If you rent this condo, your happy family will happily stroll down the beach together just like this one! Your hair will always go the right way in the wind. Your children won't pull each other's ponytails. You definitely won't end up on a beach trip right after a major tropical storm that results in the entire beach, end to end, being covered with jelly fish—which do sting after they're dead (if you were wondering)—and you definitely won't spend the whole vacation in said condo that feels smaller by the day as you

and your younger sister recover from jelly fish stings. That never happens in the advertisement.

Ads aren't there to show us reality, just dreams. It's a dream we already have, or one they're trying to convince us to buy.

And, so, its time for them to convince us to get our beach bodies ready.

Whatever that means.

At this point, you may be thinking, "where is she going with this?"

You may be thinking, "ooh, I've always wanted a good reason to stick to a diet. Perhaps a Jesus diet is just what I need!"

Maybe, if you've been in Bible study with me, you're thinking, "Okay.... A wait, what is coming."

If you haven't been in Bible study, a "wait, what" is what we call a moment when you're reading scripture and suddenly something happens that causes you to pause and say, "wait! What?" These are the foundation for our discussions most nights. These are invitations to go deeper, to ask more. "Wait, whats" are sometimes God's invitation to us to explore.

And, if you were guessing a "wait, what" was on the way... you were right!

Beach body? In church? Wait, what?

Listen closely. God doesn't call us to diet or perfect our bodies to an American standard. And I know that may be an odd thing to hear from a young, able-bodied lady. (easy for her to say!). But God calls for us to care for **all** of creation. God gives us dominion over **all** of creation, starting in Genesis! The most primary bit of creation that we have the honor and responsibility of caring for? Our own bodies.

Having your own beach body needs to start with deep love and compassion for the body you've been given.

And, really, I'm all about talking about how we can care for our bodies as God's creation. I can talk all day about how society tricks us into believing lies about our bodies. I can even tell you all about the lies I myself believe about my body on a regular basis.

But that's not where we're going with this.

No, this Easter season, as the Easter People we are, we're going to talk about what it means for Christ's Body to be Beach Ready.

So this isn't about just me and just you. Its about the whole body of Christ.

Obviously, we're not going to squeeze Jesus into a bikini. So, what might it mean to get Christ's body into shape?

You know, the Bible can be pretty confusing. It's full of metaphors and stories and examples. Some only seem to relate to the first century. Others seem applicable to all time. Its hard to know how to interpret it.

Throughout the New Testament, we see stuff about the Body of Christ. You've probably heard it before. Perhaps that the church is the Body of Christ. Or that we're each part of it. Or.... Something else.

I think, if we want to understand it, we're gonna have to read it at the source and go from there. So, to start our series on the Beach Body of Christ, we'll start with one of the fundamental body-of-Christ texts, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Now, as I read, I want you to **imagine** something. I want you to imagine you've just come to talk to me, or another pastor. You've just told us something and for some reason, we responded by reading this passage to you. I want you to wonder what you said. Did you ask for help with something? Is that why I'm reading this? Did you tell me a story? Did you confess something challenging? You fill in the context.

Listen to the Word of the Lord.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of

smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." 22 On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; 24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

This is the Word of God for me, and for you.

So, what were we talking about? What did you identify with?

For me, it reminds me of **camp**.

Specifically, of one activity at West River and at Manidokan, our UMC camps. I worked at Manidokan for a few years. This activity is like a giant see-saw with a huge platform you stand on, rather than seats for sitting. Its big enough for groups of 15-20 to stand on it. If they can work together, they can balance it so that no parts touch the ground.

I love leading groups through this. I love letting them solve it. The early attempts are often wild. The board will swing from one side to another. It's so wild that the beginning instructions include keeping all hands and feet above the platform at all times. If folks sat with their legs dangling and the platform suddenly swung down with everyone's weight on it? It may not end well.

This activity is only fun if people work together and take the safety rules seriously. If someone decides the group is moving too slowly and they can balance it themselves **if only everyone else would just **hold still!**** then their running and moving causes chaos rather than solutions. If someone feels left out of the discussion or ignored and goes and sits off to the side? They run the risk of not knowing when the swings will happen, and the group can hurt them. That kid is often also one with a good idea. The group may listen to the louder kids and have to try more things rather than giving everyone a chance to learn. Its part of the dynamic they need to figure out to be successful.

My favorite? When I have a group of parents and kids, rather than just kids-like a school group. I love how the parents talk to each other quietly about how the problem should be solved. Some parents try to get in the middle to help. Some stand smugly watching the chaos. Each group has it's own personality! Each body has its own strengths and weaknesses. The parents always get the benefit of watching their kids struggle through the problem solving. Afterwards, they are surprised when I send them onto the platform, too. Because they've watched it happen, they think it will be easy. They think they've already solved it before they've stepped up. They

think the wild swings are from the kids being wild, not that it's the nature of the activity. Within seconds of having their feet on the wobbly, wild platform, I see them have more appreciation for their kids. They do tend to solve the problem quickly, but not before they understand the difference between what they thought would happen, and the reality. When they're done they have more in common with their kids.

At West River, this is one stop on what they call the Corinthian Trail. On the Corinthian Trail the whole body of Christ needs to work together to solve problems. Some are about going "up and over." Some are about learning to spot each other patiently. Some are all about achieving a goal together. Every activity requires that each camper know the plan, their responsibility, and team work.

This scripture is about being part of something larger than just you. In fact, 1 Corinthians is all about learning to be part of something larger. This is a letter that Paul wrote to a group of new Christians in a town called Corinth. Corinth was a hub of wealth, social mobility, and religion in its day. It was a town for transient people. Sailors on break, people who have just become wealthy, people who were, according to historians, known for being, *well, shallow*. All places have their stereotypes and that was theirs. It was filled with people who wanted to move up the social ladder and get in good with the bosses. Or, with *anyone* with more status than them. They just wanted to go UP. Their town was filled with people who lived for their mobility, rather than their morals. Historians tell us it was literally known as "Sin City."

What a place to start a church!

What a place to grow your faith!

Paul is writing to them after having spent at least a year and a half with them. He's now in another place but still writing back and forth with them to help them in their questions of melding faith and life.

For a group of people who have only existed to find their place on the social ladder, what a surprise following Christ must be.

On the social ladder of the day everyone has someone else above them. Even the Emperor is subject to the gods. You can be placed in a seating arrangement based on your place in the social hierarchy. You'll know where you belong and so will everyone else.

So, imagine their surprise at finding out we're all just siblings in Christ. We're not higher or lower anymore.

They may have gotten to Corinth just so that they could use their new wealth to get even more. They may have just been there as they passed through from one place to another.

Now, suddenly, they have faith in a God who upends their entire way of being by taking down the ladder and making it more like a stop on the Corinthian Trail. Every part, *every person*, has a role. Now they have to communicate their gifts, desires, boundaries. Others are depending on them and they're expected to depend

on others. Suddenly mutual dependence is a good thing, not something shameful or weak.

Can you imagine what a hard transition this would have been?

Honestly, they sound a lot more like us than I thought. I always thought the Corinthians must have been great Christians with some good questions that Paul chose to answer. Actually, it sounds like they're people who aren't used to having their hearts in the right place, so they don't know what to do. It sounds like they want to be self sufficient and to look like they have everything together all the time. It sounds like somehow Christ wormed into their hearts and they don't have a context for how to handle it.

I don't know about you... but I've definitely encountered problems I've wanted to solve but haven't known where to start. I've heard so many people lament, "why can't we just get along?" "Why can't we just be One in Christ?" "One Body, right?"

That sounds an awful lot like having your heart in the right place but not knowing where to start.

The Corinthians needed to know they had to start with seeing that each part is vital even when its not beautiful. The Message translation has a hilarious translation talking about how much you appreciate your intestines working if you've been constipated. You probably don't want to think about it on a normal day, but boy *oh boy* does it matter that everything is working well! (I can say that because it's

literally in the Bible.). And, well, what it actually says is “wouldn’t you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?”

The Corinthians had to figure out their own roles and how to communicate it in a new way. That’s hard. Now, at camp, we have to learn to communicate, too. We don’t start with the complicated or dangerous activities. We start with small trust circles in the grass where we stand shoulder to shoulder and make sure we all know the same cues for starting and stopping. “Spotters, are you ready?” “Yes, we are ready.” “Falling,” “Fall on.” “Thank you, spotters.” As we improve our communication and prove trustworthy, we can tackle activities that are harder and harder- and often more rewarding. If someone gets dropped? That reduces the group’s trust, and we need to work to earn it back through successfully not dropping people.

The Body of Christ isn’t born “beach ready” with perfect communication. Joining the church, becoming a Christian, getting involved in missions, getting to know people, these are steps, but it’s not going to be an overnight transition. Sometimes it feels like a rush! There’s a honeymoon period-especially if you’ve just become a Christian. It feels like nothing could ever go wrong. You’ll always be in love and in communion with God. And yet, without maintenance, and when life comes in, it gets harder to be consistent.

We all know that crash diets, new weight loss gadgets, or magic pills don’t lead to lasting change. And, often, its not healthy. It’s the same for the Body of Christ. I can practice contributing my part, but I may not know how to set boundaries yet. If

not, I may burn out. Or, others may see my contribution and assume I don't need anything else. It may look like great functioning, but like a magic pill, or the kid running back and forth on the platform trying to solve the balance alone, it will be temporary, and it may be wild.

Instead, we can listen to Paul talking to the Corinthians. We need hands, feet, eyes, noses, ears. We need all of the parts to work together, preferably at the same rate! We need the whole system to communicate well so that if the eyes see a problem, they can tell the feet to stop!

I want to read part of the scriptures in the Message version. As I do, think about how you see Christ's body functioning or not around you? What small steps could we practice together? At camp, it's the trust circle. What does that look like in our church, families, or community?

12-13 You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or

Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

14-18 I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, transparent and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

19-24 But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost; I don't need you"? Or, Head telling Foot, "You're fired; your job has been phased out"? As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way—the "lower" the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or

clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?

25-26 The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

My friends, this is the Good News. We are made for more than just being bodies on beaches. We are made to be part of the body of Christ. But it's not immediate. And it doesn't happen without practice. This Easter season, for the next 6 weeks, we're going to do a Body of Christ Bootcamp. You notice that bodies of all kinds go to the gym. Bodies that are just starting a fitness journey, and bodies that are so buff they wouldn't fit in one of our pews. Bodies in wheelchairs, bodies that hobble, bodies that run. All bodies need movement and there are different exercises that each need to get strong. What does our body need? Are we going from 200 to 2000 steps a day to start? Or are we already benching our body weight and are looking to get stronger? Where we are now determines our path. And I know you've said to stop saying this, but I am still pretty new. July will be year one of hopefully many more. You'll have to tell me what this body needs.

God's grace will be our guide as we learn to walk in step together. Amen.