**Sum of the Parts**

**FBC Albemarle**

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Many of you know my undergraduate degree from NC State is in math education I taught in the classroom for three years and coached several sports. It was my dream job! I always wanted to teach and coach, especially basketball. Until God messed up my plans (He has a tendency of messing up our plans), I was going to move to Indiana to teach and coach basketball. As you might guess, one of my favorite movies growing up was Hoosiers, a movie about a basketball team from a small farming community that won the state championship against the large city schools. Having majored in math education, I never miss a chance to insert math into my sermons if possible.

One of the key concepts of math taught in the elementary grades is the Associative Property of Addition. If you remember (I’m sure you do), the Associative Property of Addition states that when three or more numbers are added, the sum is the same regardless of the grouping of the numbers. In other words, if you were adding 2+3+4, you could add them in any order and you would come up with the same answer of 9. In many ways, Paul was using the Associative Property of Addition in Romans 12. Paul was saying that the body of Christ is only complete as the “Sum of the Parts.” It doesn’t matter how we add it up. The body of Christ is not complete without every member sharing their gifts and talents with the whole. In short, each of us plays an important part of making this church as strong as possible.

Last week, we focused on being a church that was centered on worshipping God for all the right reasons and being a church that wanted to share God’s blessings with others in our community, in our nation and around the world. This week, we focus on what it takes to be a strong church to carry out these purposes as we pull together to be the body of Christ or sum of the parts.

Romans 12 is a turning point in Pauls’ letter to the Romans. Many theologians will divide Romans into two major sections: chapters 1-11 as the doctrinal theology and chapter 12-16 as the practical theology. However, it is important to remember that what Paul laid out in the first 11 chapters undergirds how Christians are to live out their faith in all areas of their lives. If we are not making practical decisions on the basis of what Paul described in the first 11 chapters (such as God’s righteousness, God’s judgment, salvation by faith, sin and forgiveness and God’s sovereignty), how do we know that we are acting in Christ-like manner? If we try to carry out the teachings of chapter 12-16 without the power of the Holy Spirit described in chapter 8, how long would be able to sustain our efforts? If we do not know that the basis for peace with God is justification by faith, how will we ever be free from the guilt that we have not done enough in the church or in our relationship with God? (Doesn’t all of this sound like something Paul would say?) The doctrine found in Scripture should not only inform our actions but it should be the driving force behind it. The doctrinal theology and practical theology cannot be separated because they need one another to be useful. Doctrinal without the practical are just useless words and practical without the doctrine can quickly lead a person down the wrong path.

So, when Paul says “Therefore, I urge you, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship,” he was juxtapositioning the sacrifice of the Jewish tradition and the sacrifice found in the New Covenant. Prior to Jesus, a sacrifice was taken to the temple, usually a choice lamb, to be killed as an offering. In the New Covenant, Paul is urging Christians to offer themselves as a sacrifice that actually brings new life rather than death. This new life is filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control…we know them as the Fruit of the Spirit.

The first step toward being a strong church is for each of us to commit to being living sacrifices. In The Message, Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse as, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” Peterson points out that offering one’s life to God daily is the only correct response to God’s act of salvation in Christ. As we talked about last week, we sacrifice our own desires for the present and hopes for the future for God’s plan for our lives, which is far greater than what we could ever dream of. That is what God reminded the exiled Israelites in Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

The second step toward being a strong church is individually and corporately shifting our paradigm toward the kingdom. Paradigm is a big word for how we see something or the lens we look through to come to an understanding. In this case, we need to shift our paradigm from a self-centered world-view to a kingdom-focused world-view.

Let me pause for a moment…you will hear me talk a lot about the Kingdom of God. I believe Jesus had much to say about this Kingdom. Sometimes in church, preachers use words that sound good but we don’t do a great job of explaining what we really mean. When I talk about the Kingdom of God, it really is referring to the world as it was meant to be like the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had perfect communion with God in the garden until it was broken by humanity’s desire to be in control. So when we pray “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying for God’s Kingdom to reign on earth as it was originally intended.

So, when we shift our focus from self to God’s will for the world, we are better able to understand what Paul was saying in verse 2. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” Most people approach this verse from an individual perspective…”What is God’s will for MY life?” However, when we see it through the lens of God’s Kingdom, we understand that his good, pleasing and perfect will leads to building of God’s Kingdom as it was meant to be.

Finally, the third step toward being a strong church is to blend the variety of gifts to carry out the work of the Kingdom. There are a couple of clarifications I want to make here. First, the gifts given by the Spirit is for the edification of the church, not for individual glory. No gift is greater than another. There is no room for pride in the God’s Kingdom. Second, just because you do not have a certain gift doesn’t mean you do not have a part to play in all areas of the church. For example, just because you may not have the gift of teaching doesn’t mean you shouldn’t teach at all. There are times when those with the gift of teaching would take the lead but there will be times when all of us need to teach. Third, there is no exhaustive list of gifts in the Bible. Paul mentions a few in today’s text and he mentions a few more in 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4. Even if you combine all of these lists together, we still do not have a complete list. God can give us gifts of all kinds, even those not listed by Paul. Fourth, there are some things in the church that does not require a spiritual gift. It doesn’t require the gift of compassion to visit a homebound person who is lonely. It doesn’t require the gift of administration to serve on a committee. It doesn’t require the gift of giving to give of ourselves and our resources. It simply requires a “want-to.”

The central point of Paul’s “body” imagery in the discussion of gifts is to emphasize that a diversity of gifts is natural, normal and necessary for the continued health and well-being of the church. There are no small or insignificant gifts. All gifts are equally important and crucial for the church to be strong and healthy. Our role is to discover the gifts God has given to us and use them for God’s glory through the church.

I told you earlier that my dream was to coach high school basketball in Indiana. A healthy and effective church mirrors a successful basketball team. A great basketball team is made up of selfless players who put the goals of the team in front of their own accomplishments. In the same way, a strong church is made up of individuals who are sacrificially living for the Kingdom. A great basketball team doesn’t focus on only winning but rather on getting better each day. It is more focused on the process than the end result. Likewise, a strong church will shift its paradigm to being kingdom-focused and doing the things that help to build God’s Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Lastly, a successful basketball team plays as one unit with different parts. Each player on the team has a role to play, starting with the most talented scorer to the last player on the bench. Every role is equally important in order to be successful. A strong church also blends the gifts of all members to make an impact in the world. No one person is greater than another and every gift must be used for the edification of the church.

This is who we are…the sum of many parts that will work together as ONE to return our world as God intended from the beginning one small step at a time.