

Members of One Another

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 23, 2026
Covenant Presbyterian Church

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the encourager, in encouragement; the giver, in sincerity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.
(Romans 12:1-8, NRSV/NRSVue)

Museum memberships and gym memberships. Warehouse clubs and airline programs. Streaming services, loyalty programs, and all those little digital memberships tucked away in apps on our phones. We belong to all sorts of things these days. Some memberships are important to us; others we probably signed up for years ago and have mostly forgotten.

And for the most part, we understand perfectly well what membership means. We join because something on the other side of the membership is useful or desirable to us. We pay something, perhaps make some commitment, and in return we receive access: to a building, a service, a discount, an experience, a community of people gathered around some shared interest. There is nothing especially sinister about any of that. It is simply one of the ordinary arrangements of modern life.

But then the Apostle Paul uses the word *member* in a sentence so strange that I suspect most of us have heard it many times without ever quite hearing what he says: “We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”

Members of one another.

Last Sunday we began wandering into what Karl Barth once called the Bible’s “strange new world.” And already Paul has taken a perfectly familiar word and moved the furniture around. We know what it means to be a member of an organization. We know what it means to belong to the same club, congregation, political party, professional association, or neighborhood. But what could it *possibly* mean to be a member of another *person*?

That question carries us right into the heart of Romans 12. Paul begins this chapter with one of the great turning points in his letter: “I appeal to you, therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice.” Everything that follows rests on those first words: *by the mercies of God*. Paul has spent eleven chapters describing a grace none of us created, earned, or controlled. God has acted in Jesus Christ to reconcile, liberate, forgive, and make new. And now Paul asks: What sort of life begins to emerge when people discover that God’s mercy is the deepest truth about them?

“Do not be conformed to this age,” he says, “but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Those words are familiar enough that they can sound almost generic. Christians ought to resist the bad influences around us. We should have better values, better ideas, more faithful opinions. That’s how we might always have heard it. But watch where Paul goes next, because the renewed mind turns out to involve something much deeper than changing our opinions.

He begins talking about how we understand *ourselves*: Don’t think of yourself too highly. Learn to see yourself with sober judgment. Recognize that what you possess has been given by grace. Understand yourself as one member of a body whose other members are different from you and indispensable to you. In other words, the renewing of the mind reaches all the way down into our answer to one of the most basic human questions: *Who am I?*

Our world has a powerful answer to that question. We are taught, in a thousand ways every day, to imagine ourselves as individuals standing at the center of our own lives. We have our preferences and ambitions, our convictions and possessions, our talents and choices. We build identities. We cultivate careers. We assemble playlists and news feeds and networks of friends. And these days, increasingly, algorithms learn what we like and quietly arrange whole portions of the world around us.

Now, understand, there are some real goods in all this. Individual freedom is a precious thing. Personal conscience matters. The ability to make choices about our own lives has been hard won by people who were once denied those choices altogether. But every freedom carries its own temptations, and ours may be the temptation to mistake *independence* for the deepest truth about who we are.

Consumer culture reinforces that assumption relentlessly, and not simply by persuading us to buy more things. It *forms* us. Day after day, it rehearses a story in which the world appears before us as an enormous field of choices, and our task is to select whatever will best satisfy, secure, express, or improve the self. We learn to stand before the world and evaluate it: *Do I want this? Does it meet my needs? Is it worth what it costs? Could I find something better somewhere else?*

Those are perfectly sensible questions when you’re buying a washing machine. They become more problematic when they become the questions by which we approach almost everything else: friendship, marriage, citizenship, community, faith, church. Because after long enough, a habit of choosing can become a way of *seeing*. We begin to imagine ourselves standing slightly

outside *every* community and *every* commitment, perpetually assessing whether it still deserves us.

And underneath that consumer script lies *another* powerful story: that there may not be enough. Walter Brueggemann has written often about the strange scarcity that haunts a culture overflowing with goods. There may not be enough security, enough recognition, enough money, enough time, enough influence, enough attention. And if there will not be enough, then wisdom would seem to require that I protect what's mine, secure my place, keep my options open, and make certain that somebody else doesn't get there first.

That anxious imagination then does something to the way we see other people. A neighbor becomes a competitor for scarce goods. Another person's success can feel like a subtraction from our own. Their need can seem like an intrusion upon resources we've worked hard to secure. Their gifts can make us wonder whether our own gifts still matter. And gradually, *What do we owe one another?* gives way to a very different question: *What do I need to secure for myself?*

It is into such a world as ours that Paul says: "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

And then he opens up *another world*.

"We, who are many, are one body in Christ." The image is so familiar in church that we can miss how radical it is. Paul doesn't say that Christians are like a committee where everybody has a job. He doesn't even say that we are like a team in which different people contribute different skills toward a common goal. He says that we are one *body*. Your hand does not stand outside your body asking what advantages continued membership provides. Your eye doesn't regard the foot as an optional relationship. Different members indeed have different functions, but they participate in *one* life.

And then Paul presses the metaphor farther than we might wish him to: "We are members one of another." We're accustomed to asking what *belongs* to us. Paul asks us to imagine that *we belong to one another*. And *that* is a profoundly different picture of the self. Now, I am *still* myself. Paul has no interest in erasing difference. In fact, difference is essential to the body. "Not all the members have the same function." Teaching and mercy ask different things of us. So do leadership and generosity, service and prophecy. The body *needs* precisely that difference; a body made entirely of eyes would not be much of a body at all!

So, Paul's alternative to our individualism is not uniformity. It is something much *richer*: a life in which I am distinct without pretending to be self-sufficient. I am gifted, but I did not create the gift. I am needed, but I am not enough by myself. I have something to offer, and I also have things I can receive only from somebody else.

Paul calls these differing gifts *charismata* – graces. They are forms that grace takes as it moves through the body. Some teach. Some serve. Some encourage. Some give. Some lead. Some

show mercy. There is something wonderfully unglamorous about that list. Paul places generosity and compassion right beside prophecy. The life of God doesn't move through the church only in spectacular moments or through especially impressive people. Sometimes grace sounds like wisdom spoken at the right moment. Sometimes it looks like somebody quietly doing the work everyone else forgot. Sometimes it's a meal carried to a door, money shared without fanfare, patience offered to someone who has become difficult, mercy extended when judgment would have been much easier.

And so, notice how thoroughly Paul has rewritten the consumer script. What I possess is no longer simply mine. What I can do is not private capital with which to build my own importance. Even the gifts by which I might distinguish myself are called *graces* – things first received from God that find their fullest meaning as they circulate through the body. Grace moves outward. It refuses to remain private property.

And none of those gifts *earns* anyone a place in the body. That's important, because consumer culture has another way of measuring people: by *usefulness*. What can you produce? What do you contribute? What value do you add? But the body of Christ cannot finally live that way.

A child *belongs* before that child can *contribute* much. A grieving person who has barely enough energy to get through the day *belongs*. Someone whose memory is fading *belongs*. Someone whose body can no longer do what it once did *belongs*. Sometimes, *you* are the hand that reaches out to steady someone else. Sometimes you are the trembling place the *rest of the body* gathers around.

Belonging comes before "usefulness." That may be the most gracious thing Paul gives us here. We don't serve in order to prove that we deserve a place. We offer what we have because grace has already given us a place.

And that changes the question we bring into community. The consumer asks, "What am I getting from this?" A *member* may ask a different question: "What is happening among us?" Who is carrying too much? Whose gift have I failed to notice? What has grace placed in my hands? What *do* I need to receive from someone else? Where has another person's wisdom shown me something I couldn't see alone?

Those kinds of questions begin to describe a church shaped by another imagination. Because even church can very easily become another place where consumer habits follow us through the door. We can evaluate worship according to our preferences, programs according to our interests, relationships according to what they provide. And again, there is nothing wrong at all with hoping church will nourish us. Sometimes we arrive desperately *needing* nourishment. But Paul is asking for something still deeper.

He imagines a community where your joy *changes* something in me. Where your grief places a *claim* upon me. Where your gift does not diminish mine. Where your difference is not simply

tolerated but *needed*. Where there are seasons when I carry you, and other seasons when I have enough humility to let you carry me.

Members of one another. What an *odd* thing to say. And what a *hopeful* thing to *become*.

Surely that is one of the great callings of the church in a consumer age: to become a place where another way of being human is actually practiced. Not simply talked about or admired, but *lived*. A community where we learn that our lives really are bound up with lives other than our own, both within and beyond these walls; where we learn to need one another without shame, and to receive from one another gifts we could never have summoned or supplied for ourselves.

Now, that kind of community will never be tidy. *Bodies* are not tidy! They ache. They heal. They tire. They grow. They bear scars. They depend constantly upon things happening in one place for the sake of life somewhere else. But they *are* alive. And I think that's what Paul wants us to imagine when he speaks of the church – not an organization held together simply by shared interests, but a *living body* held together by the grace of God in Christ.

So maybe the question Paul leaves with us is simply this: *With what imagination shall we live?* The world around us will keep rehearsing one story about who we are – individual lives to be secured, improved, and protected. But the gospel gives us another story: our lives have been given to us in mercy, our gifts have been given for more than ourselves, and somehow, by the grace of God, we have been given to one another.

What kind of people might that grace make us capable of becoming together?

To the glory of God! Amen.