



October 15, 2017



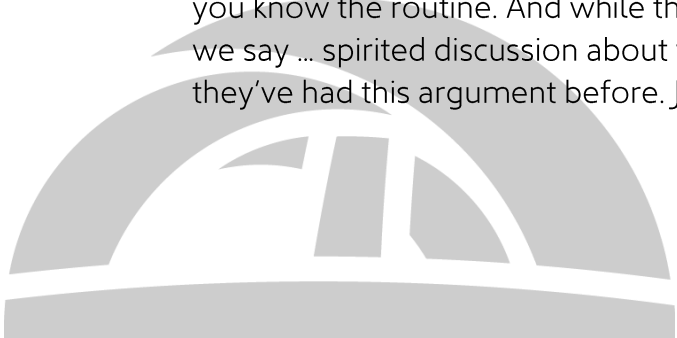
THE CHURCH IS HOLY AND MESSY  
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

### **I CORINTHIANS 12:12-27 NRSV**

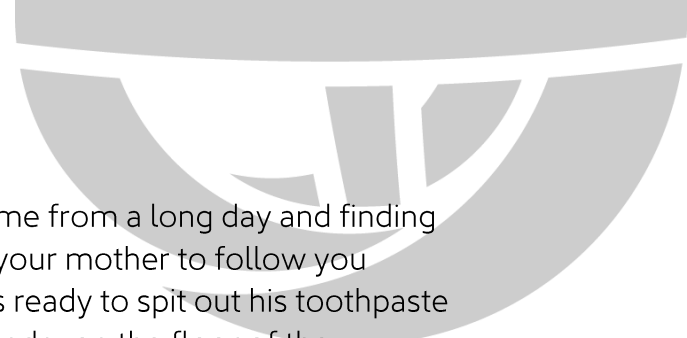
<sup>12</sup>For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

<sup>14</sup>Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot were to 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. <sup>16</sup>And if the ear were to 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. <sup>17</sup>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? <sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup>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.” <sup>22</sup>On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup>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; <sup>24</sup>whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup>that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup>If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

<sup>27</sup>Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.



There’s a scene from the early 90s sitcom *Mad About You* that sticks in my head ... even all these years later. The show’s leads are a married couple named Paul and Jamie. In this particular episode they’re getting ready for bed – flossing, face cream, you know the routine. And while they’re sharing the sink, they’re also having a ... shall we say ... spirited discussion about why their apartment has gotten so messy. It’s clear they’ve had this argument before. Jamie, the wife, is getting after Paul about leaving



his clothes everywhere. Jamie says, "I hate coming home from a long day and finding your dirty socks all over the place. It's like you expect your mother to follow you around and pick up after you. It's not fair." As Paul gets ready to spit out his toothpaste the camera pans to a pile of what is clearly Jamie's laundry on the floor of the bedroom. "You do it too," he says. "Yeah," says Jamie. "But you're lazy. I'm just tired."


So how many of you have ever had a thought like that? That when someone one else does something, it's a character flaw; but when it's you, there's a good reason for it? There's actually a scientific term for this phenomena. It's called **fundamental attribution error**. It's the tendency to explain our own behavior taking external factors into consideration. It might sound like this: *I was only driving that fast because the other car was right on my tail. Or: I would have called you back but I've been swamped at work.* But when other people do the same thing, we think it's who they actually are. *He's a really aggressive driver. She's an inconsiderate friend. You're lazy. I'm just tired.*


Lest you think fundamental attribution error is a new idea, pick up Martin Luther's Small Catechism. Luther's explanation of the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment directs us to counter this instinct. The 8<sup>th</sup> commandment is: Thou shall not bear false witness. What does this mean? Luther writes, "We are to fear and love God so that we do not betray, slander, or lie about our neighbor, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain his actions in the kindest way."

So not to put you on the spot or anything, but when's the last time you explained someone's actions in the kindest way? Especially if that person were to say, look or act or vote differently than you? It's hard, isn't it ... we're human! We judge. We criticize. We compare. And we don't always treat one another with the grace that we bestow upon ourselves.

That was one of the things causing tension at the church in Corinth. There was a, shall we say, spirited discussion about whose spiritual gifts were more valuable. Was it better to be able to speak in tongues or to pray eloquently? To heal or to preach? Given the friction Paul alludes to, no doubt members of the community were talking amongst themselves – and probably not in the kindest way.

In response, Paul reminds them that in the church, there are many members, but one body. All have a vital role to play in God's family. There is no hierarchy – every person matters. That's equally true whether you're a pastor or a church custodian, a first-time visitor or a charter member, someone who never misses a Sunday or someone whose idea of regular attendance is Christmas and Easter. We all have something to share. We are all just as important to Christ.





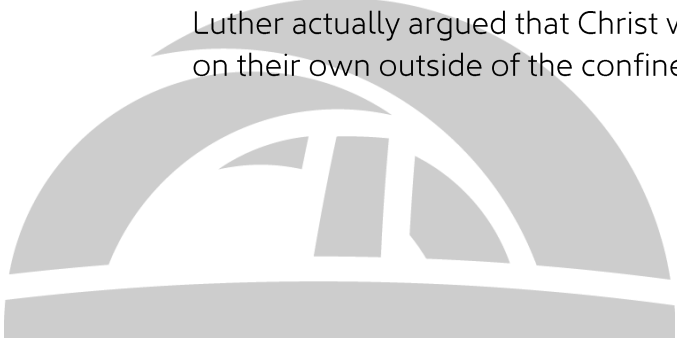
On the surface, this sounds good. But remember, we're human. We judge, we criticize, we compare. And we want other to value what we value, to like the same things we like, to carry on traditions that have meant so much to us. And when that doesn't happen, things get messy.

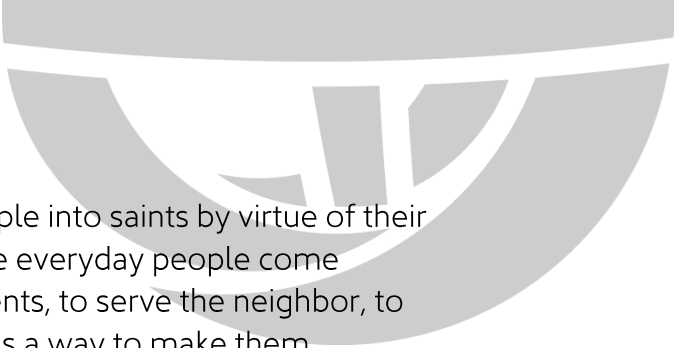
Here's an example: For years trends in church attendance have painted a bleak picture. 50% of families drop out of the church after confirmation. By the time graduation rolls around, that number is closer to 75%. As someone who's spent her career focusing on youth and families, that's downright horrifying. It's led to a lot of soul-searching and gnashing of teeth. Fundamental attribution error leads me to think, 'These families are just using the church. They don't really love Jesus.' But here's the thing: now that my own teenagers are on that cusp – with one in college, one a senior in HS, and one being confirmed this spring – my perspective has softened somewhat. Maybe it's not that these families don't love Jesus. Maybe they're just exhausted, pulled in a million directions by life that doesn't always line up with the church's schedule. If anything, they need more grace, not less. And while this isn't the case for all of those families who disappear, many of them are practicing their faith outside of this place – by supporting one another, serving the community, and praying for their kids. Do I wish they were in the pews every Sunday? Absolutely. But I have to trust that God is still at work in their lives.

This doesn't sound like a very satisfying answer, and it's not. There is no easy or right answer here. It's hard when whole generations feel like they're missing. Just like it's hard to let go of beloved traditions from the past or watch new directions take root that you might not agree with. But New Testament Professor Brian Peterson writes that diversity in the church is not a problem to be avoided, solved, or managed. It is a gift of God's grace and a sign of the Spirit at work.

Theologian Martin Copenhaver writes, "The true wonder is that God can be found here, inside the church, among quirky, flawed, and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another. God throws us together in the church and says, in essence, "Here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with other people, to forgive, and even to see God in one another. After all, if you can find God here, you can find God anywhere."

Luther, who believed that we are *simul justus et peccator* – at the same time fully saint and fully sinner – might say amen to that. Luther had very little use for the church of his day, by the way. He was disgusted by the way the hierarchy played out. He saw it as corrupt, greedy, and self-indulgent. In his essay *On Councils and the Church*, Luther actually argued that Christ was better served when people practiced the faith on their own outside of the confines of the formal tradition.





But Luther trusted the Holy Spirit to turn everyday people into saints by virtue of their baptism, which unites them to Christ. Then, when these everyday people come together to hear God's word, to partake in the sacraments, to serve the neighbor, to pray and praise Jesus, and to follow the cross, God finds a way to make them members of the same body, the body of Christ.

Friends, when we gather here, we experience the messiness of life in all its fullness. And we experience the holiness too. Because every time we confess our sins and receive the words of absolution, we receive grace that we can pass on freely to others. Every time we hear that Christ's body is given for you we are reminded that it is given for others too. We are redirected to explain others' actions in the kindest way. And we can trust that no matter what, we are members of God's family. Thanks be to God. Amen.

