

Dear members and friends of St. John,

Pastor Dugood bumps into a parishioner at the local supermarket. He smiles, "I'm glad to see you! How's your **personal relationship with Christ** going?" Myrtle May replies, "Well, I've been staying home more, and I've taken up meditation and yoga. I've even been reading my Bible!" "Oh, is that why you haven't been in church in a while?" the Pastor asked. "Yes! But I feel so much closer to God now!"

Oh, Myrtle May! You have *indeed* been listening to the church over the past two decades. And what is the popular Evangelical message – preached from the pulpit, and written in popular Christian books? "**Develop your personal relationship with Jesus,**" of course. And, there's another more insidious voice out there that has been encouraging her as well: **the voice of this world telling Myrtle May that she can find her own spiritual pathway through life.** Both the church and the world echoing similar themes: You are able to spiritually flourish on your own.

Pastor Dugood shouldn't be too shocked at Myrtle May's response. After all, how many messages did he give, charging his flock with this command? And how many talk show hosts have told people to find their own meaning to life, by searching inside oneself for the answer? But is that what the Bible teaches?

Turning to **Romans chapter 12:** *"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness"* (vv. 4-8). From this text we can conclude that God has a plan that includes us coming together in His Church, sharing our different and yet vitally important gifts and talents for the good of His kingdom.

Or, how about these words in **1 Corinthians 12:** *"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free— and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot should 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. ¹⁶And if the ear should 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many parts, yet one body"* (vv. 13-20). **Note how St. Paul specifically attacks the notion that we can be individual members of Christ. We cannot.** Look at verse 19 again. *"If all were a single member, where would the body be?"* The Body is the Church. And yet, **if members act independently of one another – the Church's function in this world is harmed. The Body is broken.**

The truth is, **spirituality in America is flourishing.** People believe in a "higher power." And **church attendance is decreasing every year.** The Bible is clear: **You cannot flourish as a Christian away from the Body of Christ.** Your congregation is the very heart and soul of your

spiritual wellbeing. And Christ is the Head. Worship provides you with the opportunity to publically confess both your sins and your faith in Christ. Jesus died for you, and He gives you the strength to carry on through the Gospel (preached and read) and the Sacraments. Church is also where we come together. Together, we complete the Body. Separately, we die.

How does this play out in your Christian walk? I've listed some fundamental questions that you might ask yourself today.

- 1. "How well do I know my congregation? Do I try to reach out to them through fellowship"** (i.e., congregation Bible Studies, Ladies Aid, congregation boards, Sunday fellowship time, Sunday brunches and church picnics)? **"Do I know them superficially, or do I know them like family?"**
- 2. "How often do I volunteer to help in the congregation?" Can you teach?** (we always have need of Sunday School & VBS teachers and guides). **Can you serve?** (we always have opportunities to serve). **Are you empathetic? Are you a good listener?** (we always have hospitalized or homebound members who would love a visit). There are too many other talents to mention here, but you get the idea.
- 3. "How often do I pray for my congregation as a body, and for individual members?"** To do this, you should know who they are, and what their needs are! Have you signed up to receive **emergency text messages** from the church, when someone is in crisis?

While growing individually in God's Word is always good – it must not be at the expense of growing corporately as part of the Body of Christ. Maybe we should be asking each other, **"How is your corporate relationship with Christ going?"**

When congregations put the needs of members and visitors and the community first, God's church flourishes. After all, that's His divine plan for St. John Lutheran Church, West Branch, Michigan. May God bless you as you seek to grow *corporately* in His Church.

Pastor Travis