



Overcoming Congregational Leprosy

Brownsburg Church of Christ

by Edwin Crozier

June 23, 2013

AM Assembly



Introduction:

Those of you who have had children, do you remember the day your child/children were born? What did you do when you first held them? Last week was Tessa's birthday and much to her chagrin, her mother and I spent a good deal of time remembering our first moments with her. We were like you. We looked to make sure she had the right number of eyes and ears and to make sure they were in the right places. We noticed her features. Poor thing, she looked just like one of my baby pictures and so the first words out of my mouth were, "She looks like me." When your baby was born, did you check to make sure he/she had 10 fingers and 10 toes? We did. But why? Why would you check for toes? Toes are insignificant, aren't they? Of course not. They represent wholeness. They represent completeness. They represent a whole body. Everything that is needed is there and in its right place.

Paul uses this very image to describe our congregation. Of course, he is actually talking about the Corinthian congregation in **I Corinthians 12:12-26**. But he is talking about us as well. We are a body. We have many members, but we are a body. And every member matters, even the toes, whoever they may be. They represent wholeness. They demonstrate completeness. A body without toes doesn't have everything it needs. We need the toes.

But there is something described in this passage that most of us think we can do without, both in our physical bodies and in our congregation. It's something we probably didn't spend much time checking to make sure our babies had in place. We didn't run too many tests on it. Though, we actually knew it was present. That something is pain, discomfort, suffering. Paul mentions it in **I Corinthians 12:26**. And while we often run tests to check for sight problems, hearing problems, even bone and muscle problems, you rarely hear of someone conducting tests to make sure the system of pain and suffering is still intact. In fact, most of us wish it would go away. But, the system of suffering in our bodies is actually one of the most important systems God has designed in us. The fact is God had a plan for pain that we must not discount. Sadly, we rarely recognize its importance in our physical bodies and almost completely ignore it in the spiritual body. But Paul says we must not discount the discomfort. We must see the suffering. We must pay attention to the pain. It may be excruciating, but let's examine the point of pain.

Discussion:

I. Leprosy

- A. In his book, [Where is God When It Hurts](#)¹, Philip Yancey tells the story of Lou, a middle-aged Hawaiian who was a patient in a clinic in Carville, Louisiana. His face is deformed. His eyelids are paralyzed. He no longer blinks and has therefore gone blind. His hands are lined with deep scars. His feet are smooth, toeless stumps. And he is losing his hearing. He is a musician who plays the auto harp. However, he only has one spot on his thumb that is sensitive enough to the instrument to allow him to play, and now his thumb is infected. The infection threatens to take away the one joy still left to him.
- B. What is Lou's malady? Leprosy. Modern leprosy is a bit different from biblical leprosy. Biblical leprosy refers to any number of infections, some of which could come and go. Some which didn't. In modern times, the term leprosy is restricted to a very specific problem—an attack on the nervous system. In fact, it accomplishes what many of us ignorantly wish for. It removes pain. It takes away discomfort. It gets rid of physical suffering. And many of us think, "That would be great."
- C. But think of Lou. The reason he is blind is because the pain cells on the surface of his eye that prompt blinking stopped feeling the discomfort. He quit blinking. He is virtually blind because he can't feel pain. Because his feet do not feel pain, he is unaware when blisters form, when he stubs his toes, when he steps on something that cuts his feet. He doesn't know to care for them. He has lost his toes.
- D. Lou, of course, is not the only sufferer. Dr. Paul Brand, on whose research Yancey depends heavily in his book, has seen the extensive impact of people who never suffer pain. For years, people thought leprosy was some kind of infection or fungus that simply ate away at people's flesh. However, as he treated many with leprosy in India he discovered that wasn't the case. Rather, because they never feel pain, because they never suffer, they never protect or care for the parts of their body that are injured. Do you understand what their problem is? When one member of the body suffers, the rest do not suffer. **I Corinthians 12:26** doesn't work for their bodies. Brand saw a man suffering from leprosy help a friend who dropped a potato in a fire.

¹ All the information about the chemistry of pain and the issues of leprosy come from [Where Is God When It Hurts](#) by Phillip Yancey (Zondervan, 1990)

He reached directly into the charcoal to recover the meal for his friend, unaware of the damage. Brand saw another man working hard in his garden, oblivious to the blood running down his hand. He later examined the shovel and found a nail sticking out at just the spot the gardener was holding the tool. One of the worst details Brand discovered was why so many of his patients were losing fingers and toes during the night. It wasn't because a fungus was eating away at their extremities. It was because rats were coming out at night and eating away at them. But because the lepers cannot suffer, they cannot respond in protection.

- E. Do you see the problem here? One part of the body is suffering, but the rest of the body doesn't know it. Since the rest of the body doesn't suffer with the suffering part, there is no protection, there is no healing, there is no caring, there is no providing. There is only destruction and death.

II. Congregational leprosy

- A. We can readily recognize this problem with physical bodies. We hear these stories and are in shock. But how often does this very problem play out in congregations. Enter **I Corinthians 12:26**. "If one member suffers, all suffer together..." (ESV). I never realized how important this verse is to our body. Have you? If you stub your toe and your whole body doesn't suffer because of it, you will likely lose your toe. If you cut your finger and your whole body doesn't suffer because of it, you will likely lose your finger. If you get debris in your eye and your whole body doesn't suffer because of it, you will likely lose your sight. If you twist your back and your whole body doesn't suffer for it, you may become paralyzed. But what about this body? What about this congregation? What if the head aches and no one notices? What if the ankle gets twisted and no one else suffers with it? What if the big toe gets stubbed and no one feels the pain? What if one of the members suffers and the rest do not suffer together?
- B. I want to call this "congregational leprosy." Sadly, I'm afraid it plagues far too many congregations. Members of churches suffer physically, emotionally, psychologically, relationally, spiritually and, worst of all, they suffer it all silently. The roaring lion sneaks out at night like a despised rat and nibbles at their fingers and toes, but no one notices. No one else suffers with them. The congregation, the body doesn't feel the pain. They simply wonder why parts of the body keep disappearing. Satan fires his darts into the hearts of brothers and sisters, but no one else feels the pain. They simply wonder what happened when other soldiers go missing in action.
- C. If one member suffers, we must all suffer. We must notice. We must listen to the pain. We must not ignore it. We must not dismiss it. We must take notice. We must care. We must suffer with it.

III. Self-mutilation

- A. Perhaps the absolute worst demonstration of leprosy comes not from those who inadvertently hurt themselves because they lack feeling. Rather, in my mind, it comes from those who purposefully hurt themselves because they can't feel it. Can you imagine someone showing off to a friend that he can hold fire in his hand? Can you imagine someone purposefully walking across broken glass to prove how tough he is to so-called friends? The worst story was another related by Yancey. A child born with a birth-defect similar to leprosy informally called "congenital indifference to pain," was purposefully harming herself. The mother, hearing her baby laughing and cooing, walked into the room expecting her to be playing some new game. She was, but it was a horrifying game. The child had bitten off the tip of her finger and was playing in the blood, making designs with it like a marker. The mother screamed.
- B. How do you raise a child like that? How do you discipline a child with that condition? The child witnessed her mother's screaming reaction and fear. From that point on, when the mother forbade the daughter anything, the girl would put her fingers in her mouth and start biting. By the time she was 16, the girl had chewed off all of her fingers.
- C. I'm sorry to share with you such a disturbing story. But at the same time, I hope you are truly horrified. Because this is a physical representation of **Galatians 5:15**, the scriptural opposite of **I Corinthians 12:26**. When all members suffer with the suffering member, we cannot possibly bite and devour one another. But when we suffer from congregational leprosy, when we do not care for one another, when we do not feel the pain we are inflicting, we will inflict the same kind of damage on this body that the little girl did. We will bite and devour one another, we will self-mutilate, and we will be consumed by one another. Sadly, like the little girl, we won't understand the consequences of our actions until it is simply too late.

IV. Anything to ignore suffering

- A. Dr. Brand, the pioneer in leprosy research and treatment I mentioned earlier, once received a several million dollar grant for the express purpose of designing an artificial system of suffering and pain. He signed on electronic engineers, bioengineers, and biochemists. They developed a kind of artificial nerve that could

be worn on the hand like a glove. When subjected to too much pressure, it would trigger a current that would set off a warning signal. But here they ran into a problem. What kind of warning signal would work better than actual pain? They started with an audible signal through a hearing aid. The problem? If the person wanted to do whatever was causing the pain anyway, he/she ignored the hum. Brand's team tried flashing lights, but the same problem occurred. They finally resorted to electrical shock. But then they learned that the signal had to be out of the patient's reach. If they could, the patients would turn off the signal until they completed what was causing the signal to go off and then turn it back on. (By the way, the project was eventually canned because try as they might these scientists couldn't replicate a system that worked as well to protect the human body as the God-designed system of suffering and pain.)

- B. But this demonstrates the problem even for the congregational body of the Lord. The fact is we don't have a congregational nervous system that automatically triggers a pain response in other Christians when one member suffers. And like those who suffer from leprosy, we do not naturally want to notice the damage being caused by suffering. Sometimes we ignore our own flashing lights and humming sounds. Other times we turn off the electrical shock others administer to express their suffering. Paul said when one member suffers, all the members suffer with it. But that actually only happens in a completely healthy body. When the body is unhealthy, we often turn off the suffering. We sadly ignore it until the affected part rots away. Then we just wonder what happened.

V. Let's embrace the suffering

- A. So what's the take away of all of this? What must we do to make sure we are living **I Corinthians 12:26**?
1. *Sound out our own suffering*: Too many of us are afraid of being a nuisance, a burden, an inconvenience. Too many of us are afraid of being judged and rejected. So we never flash the warning light, sound the hum, or jolt the shock. We suffer silently. We feel isolated and lonely, but never tell anyone. We keep falling to a particular sin, but we never tell anyone. We are starting to have doubts, but we keep silent about them. We are going through financial, emotional, relational turmoil, but we say nothing. We have been hurt by a brother or sister, but are afraid to rock the boat. We don't know how we can live another day in our present situation, but we try to do it alone anyway. The rest of the body never finds out that we are suffering because we are afraid they won't suffer with us, but will simply cause us more suffering. I know that many of us have good reasons for this perception. However, we must know that congregational leprosy is not overcome by silent sufferers.
 2. *Listen to the suffering*: Let's face it. We don't like pain of any kind. When someone announces their suffering, our natural reaction is to run. We are afraid we will get sucked into their pain. We are afraid their pain will take over our lives. So we ignore their cries of suffering. We do not mourn with them. We do not run to them. We do not marshal all the resources of the body to protect the wounded part, to heal, to restore. Rather, we isolate them even more. We make excuses for not helping. We justify our ignorance. We dismiss the sufferer as a complainer, weak, troublemaker. We come up with reasons why their suffering is not important and doesn't have to be dealt with. We salve our consciences by flipping off the switch that alerts us to the injury. We must not do this. When someone expresses their suffering, we must listen to it.
 3. *Care for the sufferer*: In **I Corinthians 12:25**, Paul had said the members must have the same care for one another. This is the same word used in other passages to talk about concern and even anxiety. Whether the sufferer is the little toe or the head, we need to care for the sufferer. We need to take anxious steps to heal and restore the one who is wounded. We must administer all the love and care we can. When the little toe is stubbed, the entire body takes on the job of protecting and healing, producing healing agents on the inside and even affecting a limp to give the little guy some needed rest from its work. We need to have this kind of care. When someone expresses their suffering, rather than telling them to man up and rub some dirt on it so we can go on our merry way and not be impacted, we need to marshal all our resources to care for the sufferer. And as all of **I Corinthians** teaches, that will only happen when we learn to love (cf. **I Corinthians 13:4-7**).
 4. *Suffer together*: As we have read again and again in **I Corinthians 12:26**, the proper response to the suffering of one of our brothers and sisters is to suffer with them, to empathize, to feel their pain, to put ourselves in their shoes. Far too often we judge and minimize rather than suffering together. And, of course, as we've already noticed, the natural reaction is to turn the pain off, especially if it lasts too long. How easy it is to respond the first week or two of suffering. But what if the suffering lingers? What if the pain continues on? Can we sit with our brothers and sisters in their suffering, or do we expect them to get over it on our timetable? Bearing each other's burdens (cf. **Galatians 6:2**) is...well...a burden. It is a

sacrifice. It means we will suffer too. And yet, that is exactly what a healthy body does. It listens to the suffering member and suffers with it.

Conclusion:

What an amazing picture. We think a healthy body is one that never suffers. Not so. Suffering happens. Sin entered the world and suffering occurs. That won't ever stop. But pain is a gift. It tells us where the problems are. And the same is true in the congregation. Our hurting members are not the ones hurting the congregation. Rather, it is when we refuse to hurt with each other that we are hurting the body. Please, do not suffer in silence. Let us know. Let someone in the body know. And if you see someone suffering, do not ignore it. Notice it. Suffer with them. Care for them. Marshal the resources of the body to protect and heal. Congregational leprosy will destroy Christ's body. Let suffering have its complete work. Let it turn our attention to the work we need to do. Healthy bodies feel pain. Healthy bodies suffer. And then they respond. How about you?