

Sermon: We are one body in Christ

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, August 23, 2026)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Mohammad was a member of my former congregation in Montreal, someone who seemed to be, by all accounts, out of place. That church was an amalgamated congregation between Robert Campbell Memorial Church and Taiwanese Presbyterian Church of Montreal, between an old-stock Canadian congregation with aging parishioners and an up-and-coming immigrant congregation with plenty of young families—an mixtures of various ethnicities, cultures and languages. Even with that, Mohammad stood out.

He was there before I began to minister to the church; he continued to be there after I left, twelve years later. He worked as a janitor for the church, and for a nearby community centre. He was also a regular worshipper on Sundays, even during the years when the congregation only worshipped in Taiwanese, a language he did not comprehend, Mohammad nevertheless persisted.

To my understanding, when he first came to Canada as a refugee from Iraq, he somehow ‘discovered’ the church in the neighbourhood. He felt accepted by the parishioners, and found the Gospel message appealing, so he stayed. He was baptized, and began to clean for the church. I wouldn’t say he was a good janitor, his standard of cleanliness was somewhat subpar. He also seemed to lack social etiquette, his demeanour unkept, and he was always inclined to hug people, something to do with his Middle Eastern culture, even in his full and wet janitorial garb.

At one time, I had to politely tell him although I was more than happy to receive hugs from him, but perhaps it might be better if he should refrain from hugging ladies in the church—I did receive some complaints. Mohammad stood out in that congregation, yet he was accepted, as part of the family, the larger family of the church.

One time, one of my boys got sick, I think it was Justin. I don’t remember what sickness he came down with, but do remember Mohammad springing into to action. He examined Justin like a doctor would, and offered advice on how to treat him and what to watch out for. I

was surprised at his level of expertise, and asked, “Mohammad, how did you come by with so much medical knowledge?” It turned out he had studied medicine back home, and had practiced for a short while as a doctor, before being driven from his hometown. He didn’t think going back to study medicine was in the card for him as he settled in Canada. So the only thing he could do was to help people, from time to time, if they so be willing. Evidently, I had totally underestimated this socially awkward and physically unappealing janitor.

If someone like Mohammad had more gifts to offer to the church, who else might I have overlooked? Who else might we have overlooked as the body of Christ? Thinking of Mohammad gives me a renewed appreciation of the words of the Apostle Paul, in Romans 12:4-5, *“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.”*

Writing to the church in Rome, around 57-58 AD, to a mixture of Gentile and Jewish Christians, the Book of Romans is sometimes hailed as the Gospel according to Paul. It is a deep dive into Paul’s theology, his understanding of God and how we can be made right with God, or justified through faith in Jesus Christ.

If the first eleven chapters are often steeped in theology, starting in chapter 12, Paul offers his take on practical Christian living. He begins by urging brothers and sisters in Christ, to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

Most of us living in the 21st century have very little knowledge nor point of reference for presenting a sacrifice to God, dead or living. Sacrificing animals by way of atoning for sins or as thanksgivings to God is so removed from our daily experience that a re-imagination of the term is required.

Sacrifice in our day-to-day usage denotes something of a trade-off, of giving up something in order to acquire some other better thing. Parents of aspiring young athletes hoping to compete at the highest levels make sacrifices in terms of time and money for training their children. Employees of companies in trouble are asked to make sacrifices of wages or benefits in order to keep their jobs. Soldiers put their bodies on the line as sacrifices to save their fellow comrades or to keep their country safe. Citizens in a country engaged in a trade war are asked to make the sacrifice of buying

only goods made in their own country, no matter the cost, as Canadians are now being asked to do.

In the same way, Paul calls on believers to present our bodies as living sacrifice in order to discern the will of God. The trade-off is giving up our bodies, the benefit is knowing the will of God.

The first thing we should make clear is that Paul is not asking for human self-sacrifice, nor is he laying down the theology of ‘taking up your cross’. This is not a call to die physically in the course of discipleship.

The way Paul understands and uses the term ‘body’ is both physical and spiritual. Physical in the sense that each part of the body is connected to another, each part plays a vital function, and all are essential to the wellbeing of the whole. Spiritual in the sense that it is the Spirit of God who has gifted parts of the body with gifts to contribute to such a wellbeing. Body and Spirit are the two sides of the same coin.

Elsewhere in his other letters, such as 1 Corinthians 12, Paul develops the same concept in much more details, but here he keeps it simple. The act of giving up our bodies starts with an orientation to be set-apart from the rest of the world—“*Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind.*” (v.2) Believers are called to be discerning of the seductiveness of this world, and to make a commitment to live otherwise.

I came across the news of a recent upsurge in simulated or fake shopping sites. A new wave of mock shopping websites is giving people the thrill of shopping, without actually spending any money or taking any delivery of goods. The idea seems to have started in South Korea, and is now spreading globally. The basic premise is to recreate the satisfaction of making a purchase, without actually taking the financial hit—a seemingly good idea amid the high cost of livings everywhere, that is until you realize such a scheme will only perpetuate a consumerist mindset, by feeding into the never-ending urge to buy something, anything.

A conforming mindset is to go along with such a scheme, but a transforming mindset is to face the ugliness of consumerism head on, realizing one cannot find true happiness through shopping, and making a commitment to find a healthy alternative.

In the body of Christ, we are a community of individuals who have faith in God through the Lord Jesus Christ. We come together in worship as an expression of a nonconformist, cutter-cultural community. We believe that our worship is a living sacrifice, pleasing and acceptable to God. We

believe Jesus is ushering a new age, a new kingdom where all things will be made new. Meanwhile, the Spirit bestows us with gifts that we can use to further such a kingdom.

Paul lists seven gifts here in Romans 12, prophecy, ministry, teaching, encouraging, the giver, the leader, and bestower of compassion or alms. This list falls under two broad categories: those who teach and those who give. The first four are all related to handling the words of God, either speaking on behalf of God, making sense of those words, or using those words to comfort and encourage the community of faith. The last three gifts are financial support functions exercised by donors, patrons, and almsgivers.

As much as teaching and giving are important functions in a church, we should be reminded that Paul has listed other spiritual gifts elsewhere. Similar lists appear in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. No two lists are identical, and we should not read them as definitive and exhaustive but illustrative and expansive. Gifts of the Spirit are not limited only by what is listed, rather they expand and multiply as needed.

What is truly important is not to think of oneself more highly than one ought to, but to think with sound and sober judgement, not too high but not too low, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. After all, faith is also a gift from God, and Christ himself honours the one who cried, “Lord I believe! Help my unbelief!”

While there are certainly those members of the body of Christ who think too highly of themselves, there are also those with obvious gifts who may think they are simply not good enough to contribute. Paul’s metaphor of the body is a reminder, a challenge for all of us that everyone, every member of the body of Christ has a gift to contribute to the functioning of that whole. What we bring individually as bodies are all needed. They are collectively presented to God as the body, the body of Christ, as a living sacrifice, as we seek to discern and to live out the will of God.

Finally, what so good about knowing and living the will of God? Let me offer you this thought: it’s like flying. One can go against the wind, with propulsion pushing with sufficient force, like a propeller engine. Or one can float with the wind, and with a bit of luck, catching a atmospheric jet stream that takes you to new heights, soaring above the cloud. That’s what discerning and living the will of God is like.

To the glory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**