

“You Are the Body of Christ”

January 24, 2021

Context

The society of the Corinthian church was marked by considerable differences in wealth. By our standards, then, ancient society was extremely unequal. The elite were very wealthy and well connected compared to everyone else, and vastly superior to them in terms of power and status. Partisanship was a standard feature of ancient Greco-Roman city life, and it hasn't exactly gone away. The United States recently came through an extraordinary election in which both sides vilified their opposition. But things were even nastier in the ancient world. There was no liberal veneer to cover things over.

The church was desperately trying to survive the factions in their own community. The problem was the church was reflecting the society around it. They were highly competitive, aggressive, tough people and sat on those beneath them. The local civic leaders in the church were acting as they usually did, striving with one another for attention and influence in an intensely competitive fashion, all while preserving their privileges and status from the great unwashed who made up the rest of the congregation.

And Paul warned:

Epistle:

I Corinthians 12:27-39

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?

Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

May God's people hear what the Spirit is saying.

Let me put the scripture reading in our context,

Oren Orr, 31, from Robbinsville, N.C., where he goes to Santeetlah Baptist Church, rented a car to drive to Washington. He carried his American flag right up below the officers on the bleachers, and his wife had a Christian flag. He said, Mr. Trump could be the last president to believe in Jesus.

Mr. Orr said he brought a baton and a Taser to Washington but did not get them out. "I know the Lord has my back no matter what happens," he said.

Abigail Spaulding, a stay-at-home mother of 15 who traveled to the rally with friends from her church in South Carolina, broke down in tears as she spoke about her fears for her children under a Biden administration. She said her husband had explained to their children that when Mr. Biden is sworn in as president, "they can take the Bible and call it hate speech and throw it out."

I don't know about you, but I struggle with what Paul told the troubled Corinthian church:

"Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it." That's a hard metaphor these days. And to add on to that, the actual body of Christ wasn't all that comfortable and, as a matter of fact, ended up getting crucified.

To be part of a body means to live with – and tolerate some kind of harmony with the other members of the body – to work with them, to be in sync, to do my job but to respect and honor and work for the success of the whole enterprise. As Paul put it, "What good is a hand without an eye?"

"You are the Body of Christ." It is one of the great mysteries of our faith.

Kathleen Norris reflects: "From the outside, church congregations can look like a remarkably contentious place, full of hypocrites who talk about love while fighting each other tooth and nail. This is the reason many people give for avoiding them. On the inside, however, it is a different matter, a matter of struggling to maintain unity as the body of Christ given the fact that we have precious little uniformity.

I have only to look at the congregation I know best, the one I belong to. We are not individuals who have come together because we are like-minded. That is not a church but a political party. We are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other, and the world: but God help us if we have to agree about things. I could test our uniformity by suggesting a major remodeling of the sanctuary, or worse, the Holy of holies – the church kitchen. But I value my life too much."

And then she digs in a little:

The church is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who do and say cruel things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the Body of Christ.” (Dakota pp.272-3).

“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it,” Paul wrote to the members of the Christian church in Corinth.

The human body is a perfect example of unity in diversity. You get it – because we all have a body. When everything works together – it is good for the whole – but if something isn’t working, nothing much is right.

If we believe that the unity of the church is a reflection of the oneness of God and the God-created oneness of the human family – then when we are divided, we violate what is fundamental to our Christian faith.

Living with those who share different beliefs and ways of being is not a luxury or liberal plot; it is part of the evangelical witness to what we are called.

That means we as Christians cannot accept it when we are divided and distrustful of each other. Because the bottom line of who we are – the church – is reconciliation. And if we do not act like that – we are making a mockery of the gospel we claim to live out.

The oneness and unity of Christian people is how we witness the truth of the Gospel. And there are some who claim an absolute corner on the truth.

We like to think we know the truth – and then we make our truth the norm – and then we attack who does not see it in same way.

The truth is – none of us gets the truth all the time – that is part of what it means to be the body of Christ.

There is something in us – that believes that only we can solve differences is with conflict and division.

What we are doing is reflecting tragically, as to what is going on in our society and world.

Nationalism, gender, – racial-ethnic identity and pride, tribalism – threaten the world to tear us apart. It happens in the church.

Here is what Paul was telling the people of Corinthians: our job as people of faith, is God’s alternative to how the world divides and fights along lines of tribe, clan, race, religion. The church is God’s precious alternative vision.

Do you see why the church is important?

“I will show you a still more excellent way,” Paul writes to the little Christian church in Corinth. It was a church not acting like church is supposed to act, which is to say, acting like the church often acts: arguing, disputing, name-calling, making a spectacle of itself, and discrediting the gospel.

I’ll show you a better way, Paul said. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Paul uses the word agape and it doesn’t have much to do with romantic feelings at all. It is about how people relate to one another in community, which means it is primarily a social and political word.

I believe this is true – the Body of Christ is like the Butterfly Effect. “Every time a butterfly beats its wings, every time a cat yawns or a baby sneezes, the whole web shifts to accommodate it. It’s called the Chaos Theory.” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

That is what Paul meant by the Body of Christ. “... that great mystery of God that binds us together whether we know it, feel it, like it or not.” And when the church gets it (we get it), we are showing the world reconciliation and a glimmer of what it means to live in community.

Here is the kicker, Paul is not asking us to agree with his body metaphor and start to act like the Body of Christ. We are not asked to evaluate the proposal or see if it works for us.

We are being told who we are – and it doesn’t matter if we understand it or like it or not. “You are already the Body of Christ. Jesus Christ has made you his body. The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ has a vision for the human race and you and I are it – for better or worse.

Unfortunately, the church can hide from this idea about being the body. And spend a lot of energy trying to deny. I do think the church’s (whatever one you belong to) survival depends on it. It is scary and risky to be the Body of Christ.

Here is a true story I have shared before. It is important to note that it happened in the midst of political and religious upheaval. Division in families, neighbors, and churches happened because of different politics and religion. As we saw the broken body played out last week at the Capitol.

Anyway, here is the story.

John Westerhoff, an American Episcopal priest, tells this story when he was invited to Ireland during the most violent part of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Church.

Twenty Protestant and twenty Roman Catholic people gathered for a conference in a border town. They came from all walks of life, clergy and lay, men, women and children. Westerhoff was asked to lead the worship and prepared a number of worship services and addresses.

When he got there, he discovered that he couldn't use them because they had come from a Protestant text. He couldn't read Biblical passages because they couldn't agree on which version of the Bible to use. A compromise was struck that he could tell Biblical stories.

After a number of days at the conference he told the story of the woman touching the hem of Jesus' garments.

Not long after that an elderly Roman Catholic monk came and sat on the floor and then a young Protestant child came. The child leaned over and gently stroked the face of the old monk three times. "Nothing happened" the little boy said, "Nothing happened."

Everyone was confused until the young boy said, "my father said that if I touched you, I would die but nothing happened." Amidst a multitude of tears the old monk hugged the young boy and said "yes, everything has happened – and everything has changed.

We are God's vision for a divided world. We are what God means by unity in diversity. We are – in ways we may not know it – we are the Body of Christ.

Amen.