

The Body of Christ, Part 2: Life Together
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 27, 2013

"We are already one. We just think we're separate." These are the words of the Roman Catholic contemplative, Thomas Merton, and I wonder what you think about them. "We are already one. We just think we're separate."

Today I am preaching the second of a three-part sermon series on "The Body of Christ" based on readings from 1 Corinthians chapters 12 & 13. Last week I invited you to substitute the metaphor of the body of Christ for the more common analogy of the church as family, and we focused in particular on Paul's statement that "to each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Today's sermon, *Life Together*, invites us to pay careful attention to some of the all important details about how we regard one another and how we function as a body. Everything I will say rests on an assumption--a given--and if you don't share the assumption--if you don't agree with the given--then there will be nothing in the sermon for you.

The assumption I make is that *Life in Christ = Life Together*. Life in Christ is by definition life together in the community of Christ-followers. Many do not share this assumption.

When I meet new people and they learn I am a pastor, they often feel compelled to explain to me their inner beliefs and why going to church isn't necessary for them. People say, "I'm a believer," and they say, "Church has nothing to do with it, it's how you live your life," and if I've heard that once I've heard it 500 times. And the thing is, I do understand, in a way.

I do understand that if you assume that being Christian means giving intellectual assent to a few key items of belief, then simply saying, "I believe," ought to take care of it. Eternal salvation? Done. All that's left is to be a "good person," which everybody defines according to their own criteria. And, voila! Church becomes instantly obsolete.

I do not agree that being Christian means giving intellectual assent to a few key items of belief. Frankly, I don't see the point. I do believe that *Life in Christ = Life Together*. Church is who we become a part of when we give our lives to Christ. Churches show the risen Christ to the world. To believe is to belong!

The risen Christ called the church to be his resurrected body--to love, serve, preach, and suffer--to continue and complete his mission. When the world sees the church, the world sees Christ.

It's Epiphany all over again. We are his body, his hands, his feet, his eyes and ears and heart and smile. We are his embrace, his rebuke, his healing touch, his flashing anger. Churches are not obsolete! Churches are how Christ shows the full colors of his compassion to the world in real time. Anybody who wants to know Christ ought to be able to show up in any church setting anywhere and find themselves falling to their knees, worshipping, and offering their gifts, their gold, frankincense and myrrh equivalents.

Is it possible to be a Christian apart from the church? Can Panda bears survive outside their natural habitat in cages in zoos? Can fish live in tanks? Perhaps. Can artists thrive with no connection to other artists and no opportunity to view the works of the great masters? Would someone who "believes in" education consider schools and universities expendable? Unlikely.

Can you tell I have strong feelings about this? (I have strong feelings about this.) The Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green IS Jesus Christ in and for this town. So look around and see who God has to work with. Our tasks are basically the same as those that Jesus put forth in the synagogue in Capernaum: bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free

How are we going to mobilize, going forward, to be Jesus together? To be his body?

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Paul wasn't the first or the only ancient writer to use the metaphor of "the body" to describe human society. The New Testament scholar Dale Martin writes that the upper classes in Greco-Roman society justified hierarchical relationships in society at large by pointing to the so-called natural hierarchy of the human body. The social body, composed of masters and slaves, men and women, the "well born" and the "vulgar," were all supposed to be content with their position in the social pecking order, in the same way that the more and less honorable parts of the human body could be ranked in order of importance. This sort of thinking was prevalent in the upper classes in non-Christian circles.

Paul borrowed the image that the elite classes used to justify their superiority and used it in a completely different way! *You are one body*, he told the Corinthian church as they quarreled with one another. *You are one body, but I don't mean it the way those high falutin' philosophers mean it, and you should take my words as an excuse to establish hierarchies and pecking orders and cliques.*

You are one body, but no one part of your body is any more or less important, any more or less honorable, any more or less entitled to special consideration than any other. In fact, the parts that are generally considered more honorable are expected to serve (and not be served by) the parts that are generally considered less honorable. The eye needs the foot. The mouth needs the hand.

Now, if this sounds Democratic, and American, and fairly logical (all of us being created equal in God's sight, etc.), remember that Paul wrote this 2000 years ago when it would have been BEYOND RADICAL. Strict social hierarchies were observed in all ancient societies. The notion of everybody being equal was explosive stuff. It had the power to transform every aspect of life together in a Christian community. And to a great extent, it did.

Paul didn't just tell the church, *Now, now, you are one body, so try to treat each other nicely.* No. Paul did not just say *you are one body*, he said, *you are THE body of CHRIST.*

Of Christ.

What holds us--the church--together is our common confession that Jesus Christ is Lord. What holds us together is our common mission to continue and complete Christ's work.

The early churches were not homogeneous groups of people. They were a real mish mash: wealthy businesswomen, heads of households and their families and servants, slaves and freed slaves, people of social prominence and people from the bottommost ranks of society.

What holds together a mishmash of people? That would be Christ Jesus. What makes a mishmash of people "one body"? That would be Christ Jesus. What gives a mishmash of people a common purpose? An ability to work through their differences as they accomplish their common purpose? That would be Christ Jesus. What gives a mishmash of people the determination, zeal, and courage to proclaim an unpopular and scary-radical new truth to a hostile order? That would be Christ Jesus.

What gives a mishmash of people enough trust to pool their resources, open their homes, share their food, give away their money, leave behind the security of the world in which they grew up to venture out on unknown paths toward an uncertain future and do it together with people that might not otherwise think even to associate with? That would be Christ Jesus.

What holds us together, mishmash that we are? What inspires us, equips us to resolve differences in our life together, motivates us to love and serve and persevere? That would be--that has to be--that can only be, Christ Jesus.

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In his book about community building, A Different Drum, M. Scott Peck tells a story that he also uses every time he leads what he calls a community-building workshop.

The story is called, "The Rabbi's Gift¹." Here is a slightly shortened version of it:

The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. It was once a great order, but because of persecution, all its branch houses were lost and there were only five monks left in the decaying house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi occasionally used for a hermitage. The old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods" they would whisper. It occurred to the abbot that a visit the rabbi might result in some advice to save his monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot to his hut. But when the abbot explained his visit, the rabbi could say, "I know how it is" . "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and spoke of deep things. When the abbot had to leave, they embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me that would help me save my dying order?"

"No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. But, I can tell you that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?"

"The rabbi said something very mysterious, it was something cryptic. He said that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant?"

In the time that followed, the old monks wondered whether the significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks? If so, which one?

Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Yes, if he meant anyone, he probably meant Father Abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip

is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for always being there when you need him. He just magically appears. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

People still occasionally came to visit the monastery in its beautiful forest to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even to meditate in the dilapidated chapel. As they did so, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery to picnic, to play, to pray. They brought their friends to this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another, and another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

Friends, we are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

To the glory of God.

Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling

1Peck, M. Scott. The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace. (Touchstone: 1998), pp.13-15

