

From the Pastor's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, August 28, 2022

Today we conclude our three-week series on the Church. I hope you understand and can even appreciate why I opted to start us here. We are, clearly, at the beginning of a new pastoral call and it seems right and good to name the purpose and function of our life together. It's good to be on the same page with one another. Of course, we could talk about the Church in a variety of ways – I have, for example, intentionally avoided more anthropological and sociological descriptions of the Church, even as those have some value – but if we're yearning to be a community founded upon the Truth of God's work and will in the world, we've done well to engage the three major New Testament metaphors for the Church.

So, to quickly review, we began by noting that we are "heaven's colony" – or, more specific to the biblical language, that we have our citizenship in heaven. This citizenship makes a claim on our lives – as all citizenship makes such claims. It is our citizenship in this heavenly colony that gives the church its political identity. Not "political" in the sense that Republicans and Democrats would use the word, but in the sense of having an ethical standard or norm that we unite around.

From there, we noted that we are adopted children of God, adopted into the Triune Godhead, which is itself understood in familial terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is this identity that describes the affective, relational connection we share with one another. So much so, in fact, that even our biological families are first formed and understood in terms of the Triune "First Family." I didn't mention it last week for the sake of time, but I take it as significant that every wedding liturgy only marries the couple "until death do us part." That means that even the strong bond of spouse with spouse is temporary. The real bond – the one that extends past death – is that of sibling with sibling.

And so now we've come to the end – having covered our shared political identity and having detailed our mutuality in relationship – to our final metaphor: "the Body of Christ." This is a unique metaphor insofar as it does *not* have an antecedent in the Old Testament. For Israel could be understood, easily, as a "colony" and even more easily as a family (since one was Jewish almost exclusively by dint of heredity), but Israel would've never considered itself the "body" of Yahweh for the simple fact that God did not have a body. We Christians, however, proclaim that in Jesus Christ, God took on flesh and, not surprisingly, that changes A LOT of things. What it means, though, to be a "Body" is not immediately clear precisely because we don't have that Old Testament antecedent to help bring clarity. For clarity, we have to turn to Paul's metaphor of this "Body."

When we do, the first thing that stands out is the stunning, systematic diversity of this body. We are each understood as different parts or "members" of this body – some of us elbows, some of us spleens, some of us stomachs, some of us the more vulnerable parts of a body. We are, intentionally and by God's will, going to be different from one another.

Of course, it is precisely this difference that might first set us on edge because we do not live in a world that handles diversity well. Ours is a society addicted to hierarchies of every sort. We divide and classify by race, gender, sexual orientation, education level, economic status, and scores of other demographic markers. While demography is not inherently evil – while it can serve as a useful tool – our society has *far more* means of discussing our divisions than it does our unity.

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Yet this is precisely where the “Body of Christ” is a blessing to us, for – as Paul makes clear – we are diverse, but we are held in unity. Indeed, without the unity, we would be utterly grotesque! Imagine a body that was just one large kidney. Gross, right? Or a body that was just a small intestine – all long, curly, and full of half-processed food. Again, you nasty! No, the unity we *must* have as the “Body of Christ” is structurally built into that metaphor of “body.” We are diverse, but held in unity. And, whew doggies, in a world laboring under the great weight of culture wars and social division, the Church stands in position to bless the world well with this unity.

I’m not dense, of course, to the fact that some in our society want to insist upon unity, too. There are plenty of good-hearted people outside of the “Body of Christ” who yearn to cultivate a society that is diverse yet held in unity. However, it has been my experience with these folks – typically kindly, liberal folks – that their path to unity always runs through a flattening of diversity. That is to say, that it is more common to hear a refrain like “We’re all the same down deep” as a justification for unity, but that misses the point and value of the diversity in the first place, doesn’t it? I want to challenge these kindly folks to fully embrace the fact that a kidney is not a finger – and to celebrate that! To be thankful that all kidneys and all fingers are *not* really just “the same down deep.” That they really are different – and that we ought to be grateful for those differences.

And the reason, of course, that we are to be grateful is because that each of us have been – in the words of psalmist – “fearfully and wonderfully made.” If you are part of the kidneys in the Body of Christ, then you ought to rejoice that you were made for that function and in service to the rest of the Body. The same with fingers, knees, toes, colons, and so on.

You may remember in my first sermon, I insisted upon the fact that God loves you, and you, and you, and all of us. Today, I add to that: God made you who you are, and you who you are, and you who you are, and all of us who we are. Far from looking at ourselves and how we are different from others – always with an eye toward changing and fitting in better – we ought to *embrace* the uniqueness of each of us while seeking to find how that uniqueness is meant to serve the whole Body.

Put in socio-political terms, we ought not try to think of the ways that black, brown, and white bodies (for example) are the same, but highlight their differences with joy and expectation. And, of course, any lived experience with diversity in our friendships helps demonstrate the veracity of this claim. For example, my friend Gavin is not my friend *in spite* of his being Black – as if that is a hurdle we both overcome in order to be friends – but rather his Blackness is a unique and meaningful expression within our friendship. To whatever degree he experiences it – that’s for him to tell, not me – I hope my whiteness does the same for him. That is to say, we encounter each other in our differences – and we rejoice with thanksgiving.

As a “Body,” we must also recognize that bodies are *for* something; they do things. The Body is meant to move and play and dance and breath and rest and laugh and cry and work. As this is true for our bodies, so it is true for the Church as a body. And if all of this moving, playing, dancing, breathing, resting, laughing, crying, and so on is to happen at all, it means that the body must be working together – that each part must be doing their part. Indeed, we know that when one part starts to falter, the rest of the body tries to compensate – often to ill effects.

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My buddy Jake has recently taken up mountain biking. Does this, you ask, mean he has to drink more than a regular allotment of IPAs and yell out “yeah boi” suddenly? Why, yes, yes it does. And that’s not great for the rest of us. Recently, though, Jake developed a little tendonitis in one of his knees. Thinking he could just grit it out, he soon found himself wearing out the non-injured knee. He was putting more of each peddle push on the non-injured knee, which only threatened to injure it too! Jake is now on doctor’s orders to rest both knees. The point for us, though, in this metaphor is to respect the important role we each have to play in this “Body” called First Presbyterian Church Bowling Green *and* to understand that when we don’t do our part that the rest of the body will suffer too.

I think it is easy for Christians to, in all humility, think that the church will be fine without them. Put Paul’s “Body” metaphor challenges this assumption. Each of us has a role to play and the rest of us need each other to play our roles well. This is why I think the real pay dirt of our entire reading today is verse 26, which reads: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” Now, scripture has different rhetorical modes. Often it is *prescriptive* – that is, what we ought to do – and often it is *proscriptive* – that is, what we ought *not* to do, but some of the time it is simply *descriptive* – that is, just the way things are. I submit to you that “If one member suffers” is of this last category; it is descriptive. That is to say, if the gall bladder has stones, the whole Body aches. (And that is an illustration I can attest to personally! Gall stones will make you think your whole body is crumbling into ash! True story, when I had my gallstones, I honestly considered the possibility that I was having a heart attack; the pain just radiated into

places that left me concerned that this might be the case).

Now, we don’t often go around thinking about the connection between gall bladder and heart, but “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” Happily, the inverse is also true. When one part feels great, we all get to feel great. And, again, our bodies witness to the truth of this. For who here hasn’t had a good meal that just left you feeling satisfied from head to toe? Obviously, a good meal should delight the tongue and the stomach, but the really good meals have a way of making our whole bodies feel great. “If one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” And if we think about it, this is true with so much of our bodies. I walk the dog not just to make my muscles feel good, but because it also clears my head, aids digestion, and strengthens my heart. Laughter, of course for me, is another great example. When we get to laugh deeply, the pleasure of that radiates through the whole body. So, I think we can trust Paul’s metaphor not only as divinely revealed, but also as existentially experienced.

And what’s further great about this metaphor is that it equally describes our life together as a congregation as it describes our life together as a Presbytery, as a denomination, and as an inter-denominational fellowship. Later this week, I get to have lunch with Deb Conklin, the pastor at Peace Lutheran Church here in town, and the same “Body” metaphor describes our lunch together as it describes our life together as a congregation. We are ALL – all caps on that “ALL” – a part of the Body of Christ.

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Yet, practically speaking, I want to end by inviting you into some personal reflection and meditation on what “member” you are of this Body. I am confident that our God has not just made FPC-BG one large spleen. Gross. No, we are a whole body in our own right, which means we each are different members and have different roles that love and support the whole body.

Of course, this level of metaphorical reflection can be tough, so let me try to model it as best I can with the hopes that your own mind and imagination will be enlivened. I first considered this metaphor personally while a camp counselor at Pine Springs Camp in 2003. We were asked, after reading this passage, what “member” we were. Now this sort of question was absolute catnip for an English major in the woods. My brain quickly whirled into action and instinctually I raised my hand, proudly proclaiming, “I’m a stomach!” Of course, the chubby kid would say that, right? But as I pushed into that metaphor, I explained that the stomach takes in all nourishment given to it, then breaks it down. The best of it is passed to the rest of the Body, while the worst is made into... well, you know. You know.

Anyway, I *loved* that, seemingly-Spirit led, self-understanding. It’s something I still cling to. It’s why I have a wall full of books in my office – most of them not all that great! It describes how I watch TV and movies, how I listen to music and podcasts. I’m constantly consuming – not with a glutton’s soul – but as an act of pulling out any nourishing bit for the benefit of the other members of the Body. My hope as this member is that these sermons, our personal conversations, and that which I write – both for the church and academy – are all the best, most nourishing bits – that I’m not unduly passing along fat that will clog the heart’s arteries or too much sugar to confuse the pancreas’ production of insulin.

So that’s me, but that can’t be all of us. Being “the Stomach Church” is just as appealing as being the “Spleen People of Bowling Green.” I need the rest of you all – the rest of the Body – to do the things you were created to do along with me. And as you do what you are made to do, the work of my member of this Body is validated and enhanced. And this is how we, collectively and never individually, witness to the world the real power and purpose of diversity held in unity. It is how the Body of Christ is made visible for all.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.