

“The Body of Christ” – Church & Holy Spirit”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, January 27, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 (12-27)

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 1 Corinthians 12:1-27

Will you pray with me. God of many members, but one Spirit, help us bring it all home to you this day. Help us to be good and productive members of *your* body, and not lone rangers looking out only for ourselves. Help us to *be* your body in the world, O God, living as Jesus would have us live moment by moment. Amen.

O.K., without looking at your bulletins, complete the sentence, “Church is...” (get responses)

My favorite theologian, Fred Buechner, defines “church” this way: “The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God’s name. [That would be us here on Sunday mornings!] Anybody can find out who they are

by going to church to look. The invisible church is all the people God uses for [God's] hands and feet in this world. Nobody can find out who they are except God. [That's us all the rest of the time, out doing for others when we're NOT here in church on Sunday mornings!]

[Buechner goes on,] Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. [Visible church inside the invisible church outside] The cynic says they don't even touch. [visible church on the one hand, invisible church on the other hand] The realist says they occasionally overlap. [hands joined with crossed fingers]

In a fit of high inspiration, [Buechner writes] the author of the Book of Revelation [which we'll consider some Sunday!] states that there is no temple in the New Jerusalem [that's life after death], thus squelching once and for all the tedious quip that since Heaven is an endless church service, anybody with two wits to rub together would prefer Hell."¹

Now, I'm here to tell you I hope you do not see *our* church services on Sunday mornings as endless and the other side of Hell!

For me, I think of church in these four ways –
church is an oasis filled with seekers after truth,
church is the body of hopeful fallen souls continually getting help standing up and then falling down again,
church is people desiring to do good in the midst of so much in the world and in our individual lives that is not good,
and fourth, church is made up of lovers of life and members of the body made up of all God's people.

All of that is church to me.

Those of us who identify as Christians are called to consider ourselves as members of the body of *Christ* within the household of all God's people. In our passage this morning from Paul's first letter so long ago to those early church folks in Corinth, we hear of his thoughts about spiritual gifts.

Then in the next verses he speaks of the metaphor of the human body that became central to his thinking and writing. Verse 12 and 13 read, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor 12:11-13)

It's brilliant, isn't it? It's an image we can relate to, even two thousand years later! The body, the human body, is not just a foot, or a hand, or an ear, but a

¹Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, A Seeker's ABC, Revised and Expanded*, New York: HarperCollins, 1973, 1993, p. 17.

whole being with many members, all working together and carrying each of us through life –

sometimes robustly and with youthful energy and innocence, as when a little girl places a feather in her pastor's hand and the pastor responds, "Oh, a momento!" And the little girl says, "No, it's a feather!"

Other times Paul's image of the body of Christ comes with great difficulty and even with some parts needing to be taken off, or tragically removed, and yet still other times seeming downright "out of body,"

as when we dream, which we all do....

as when I am mesmerized watching a humming bird sit in absolute stillness while sucking up sweet water from a little feeder made just for them and stuck on the other side of a window,

as when we sit by the bedside of a loved one feeding them little spoonfuls of soup because they are too weak to eat alone and without help.

Being the body of Christ, living out the gifts of the Spirit which Paul says we all have, doesn't mean we're perfect or specially chosen by God for a place in the front pew of life. Being the body of Christ means we are accepted as we are, and it would be a fine gesture if we extended a hand of warmth and fellowship to all others.

Yes, the church is *all* of us, inside and outside of these sacred walls. Here inside, a great cloud of witnesses surround us. In their earthly lives, they were falling down and then getting up again just as we do now. They surround us with both their frailties and their finer points.

Yes, we are called to be the church, the body of Christ, for those who will come after us... to sit in these pews, to stand in this pulpit, to serve in our community, to pray and hope for a good life for all people in the world, no matter their religious persuasion, or no persuasion at all.

My study of scripture tells me Jesus didn't teach, and pray, and proclaim that we had to all *be* alike, but that we *take a liking* to each other, and to those we don't know, and to those we might consider to be strangers, foreigners to our particular ways of thinking and believing and living. The body of Christ is a multifaceted body.

And we know bodies come in all shapes and sizes and colors and persuasions. Just walk down the aisles in Hannaford's and you'll discover that! Just walk through the lobby of Boston Children's Hospital or down one of the halls of the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital at Maine Medical Center in Portland, which I've had the opportunity to do on several occasions in past years. You'll see that little bodies hurting come in a wide array of human flesh and blood.

We come to church, it seems to me, to remind ourselves that we are not alone. We need one another – big bodies, little bodies, hurting bodies, healthy

bodies, broken down bodies, old bodies, new bodies. We need the companionship of one another.

One of the commentators of scriptures I read before today writes, “We need places to pray as if someone were listening, to study as if we might learn something worth writing on our hearts, to join with others in service as if the world might be transformed. Churches are places to learn to practice, with others, a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change.”²

There’s a key transition in that quote – “as if” – we need to pray, to study, to join with others... “as if” the world might be transformed. *What would life be like* if we truly lived “as if” all could be well? Too often, it seems to me, we live “as if”....

nothing will ever be well....

as if no problems will ever be solved....

as if no political arguments will ever be settled to the liking of all partners or adversaries....

as if no amount of effort expended will ever correct the injustices of the world.

This commentator says, “Churches are places to learn to practice, with others, a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change.”

She quotes theologian Kathryn Tanner who defines Christian practices as “doorways through which we enter an argument. Through Christian practices, she says, we participate in an argument over how best to live as disciples of Christ and learn to live our way into new and unexpected answers.”³

Paul invited his hearers two thousand years ago, and he invites us this morning, to consider the gifts we have to give to others from our individual talents and to affirm the parts of Christ's body we inhabit.

Here’s two questions for the day: What does church mean to you? And how do you live out the part of Christ's body that is yours?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

²Stephanie Paulsell, “Soul experiments,” *The Christian Century*, quoted on the back page of the July 24, 2013 issue.

³Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body, Meditations on a Christian Practice*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, p. 6.