

Text: I Corinthians 12: 12-31
Title: A Body Beautiful and Broken
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On the second Sunday of Advent 1897, the Rev. John Riemersma celebrated communion with the congregation of the First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago. After the service he began to drink the communion wine....

Rev. Riemersma was a gifted and groundbreaking leader. On his watch the afternoon Sunday school classes were taught in English ~ the morning classes were still in Dutch. He helped plant a school and co-sponsored a missionary to the "Persians" with the Reformed Church across the street. And when the First CRC building was being renovated Riemersma even encouraged the members to worship with their Reformed Church neighbors. Groundbreaking....

But, on that early December afternoon Rev. Riemersma drank too much communion wine and he showed up inebriated for the evening service.

The council immediately began deliberations and after much debate, his promise to not abuse alcohol again, and a public confession of this lapse during the Christmas Eve service, Rev. Riemersma continued to serve as pastor. However, significant congregational unrest eventually led the Elders to suspend him, cut off his salary, and ask classis (the regional governing board) to depose him. As was reported in a weekly newsletter:

An impressive object lesson on intemperance was recently given to the Hollanders of this region. After years of tippling, a prominent minister of the Chicago Holland Christian Reformed Church became enslaved to his drinking habits, was intoxicated on the Lord's Day, and is suspended. It is a painful and public scandal, by which the name of Christ and his Church will be blasphemed. Such a warning may, however, do good just where it is sorely needed.

Classis gave Riemersma another chance, and although it didn't sit well with many in the congregation he returned to serve the church. Sadly, only four months later he again preached "under the influence" and was asked to resign. Soon after a church member accused Riemersma of having an affair with his wife.

Riemersma was deposed, the congregation struggled as families transferred to other churches, and the First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago went through a long vacancy as they received multiple "letters of decline" from prospective pastors.

The church of first century Corinth was likewise troubled.

They were splintered by theological divisions, cultural differences, and styles of spirituality. Some followed this leader while others followed that; there was jealousy, quarreling and dissension. There was enough infighting that church folks were suing one another in civil court.

There was sexual immorality. A man in their company took up with his father's wife. She was probably his step-mother and it seems as if there was some flaunting of the situation, suggesting that in their liberty from the law they believed all things were now acceptable....

But, there were enough questions about relationships and sexuality that Paul wrote at length to the Corinthians about marriage, remarriage, divorce, prostitution, virginity, and how women might need to cover their heads.

And, the celebration of communion ~ which was more like a pot-luck than cubed bread with a grape juice chaser ~ was in such disarray that some gorged themselves to the neglect of others and some got drunk while others went thirsty.

But! But, to this collection of God's people,
to these folks marked by infighting, infidelity, and ignorance,
to a troubled and troublesome congregation, (*William Willimon*)
to a community in conflict and confusion,
to this church, Paul blurts out:

Now, you are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it.

What's most remarkable is that Paul doesn't say
after you clean house of the fallen and failed,
after you get things right,
after you are doctrinally sound and morally solid,
after you pure and pureed,
then you could be, you oughta be, you might be the Body of Christ.
Nope! Without equivocation or condition, he names them as the physical presence of the Ascended Lord.

And as God would say that to the first church of Corinth, so he would say it to the First Christian Reformed Church of Chicago, and so he would say the same to us:

You are the body of Christ, and each of you is a part of it.

Now, while this introduction might tickle at the edges of Hope's memory, I don't mean it to be flip or to make excuse with a nudge and a wink. Rather, it is to recognize that the church has always been and will always be...

broken,
and flawed,
and fallen,
and conflict ridden,
and human.

And yet, that same church is the physical presence of Christ in this world and called to the same purpose that Christ named in his inaugural address:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

To pick up phrases from sermons of the last few weeks:

You belong to God in Christ.

You belong to one another.

Baptism is a sign and seal of that belonging.

You are gifted for the common good.

And this morning: You are the Body of Christ ~ the living embodiment of the Risen Lord.

The Greek word that we translate as church is *ecclesia*, it means summoned or called out. It was originally used to describe things like the civil assembly in Athens ~ that body summoned out of the populous to govern. The New Testament writers use it to describe the church as that collection of people called out of the world to form a new community.

A different body with a different head; the head was not Caesar the head was Christ. A different body with a different purpose; called out of the world for the sake of the world. A different body....

and each has a part in that body,

and each part is dependent on the rest of the body,

and each part is crucial for the rest of the body.

A body defined not by hierarchy but by a sort of organic interdependence.

Yung Suk Kim, in the Christ's Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor puts it this way:

In such an ideal Christ-informed community, all must be equally respected regardless of their class, ethnicity, or gender. All are baptized into one body and were made to drink of one Spirit.

You are the Body of Christ.

That's quite a claim. For not only does that mean we're connected in an organic unity but it also means that Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholics, black Baptists, and Korean charismatics are part of us as well. It means that the body is liberal and conservative, rich and poor, gay and straight, young and old. It includes pink-hatted progressives, red-hatted right wingers, and every manner of worship practice and scriptural interpretation. The defining quality of the body being those who belong to God in Christ.

And it means that wherever that body is persecuted the whole body is persecuted (Like the bombing of a church in the Philippines this morning...) and where one part is bruised, betrayed, and broken the whole body is bruised, betrayed, and broken.

Dear friends, the broken hearts and lives that lie in the wake of the abuses and cover-ups of the Catholic Church and a parade of Protestant pastors is damning. I routinely want to wrench and wrench myself out of a body that is too often distorted and twisted from its original calling. Sometimes I think the only option is to be called-out of the called-out ones.

And while there is great worry about the “nones” (those with no religious affiliation) there is also a growing number of “dones” (those who are done for all sorts of reasons and just walk away from the church). I get it. There’s not adequate language for those who have been betrayed by the church. And, I don’t think there’s any defense to offer those whose trust has been shattered or whose lives have been mangled.

And yet....

And yet, the remarkable claim of the gospels is that you belong.

To the lost, the losers, and the liars God keeps saying, again and again and again, you belong. You belong to God in Christ. Throughout scripture God keeps calling people back to faithfulness and obedience and to a way of life remarkably different than the worlds. Throughout Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he keeps encouraging, challenging, shaping, calling to confession, and proclaiming forgiveness to a body beautiful and broken.

In spite of our failings God doesn’t abandon his body.
You are the Body of Christ.

Maybe one of the freedoms of this congregation is that our collective hearts have been broken by leaders, by each other, by our own humanity. We have no misgivings about the flawed and fallen quality of the church. We don’t have leaders on pedestals. We’re not interested in propping up myths. We know our own wounds and divisions and in that we know something about being the Body of Christ ~ bruised and vulnerable and weak.

When Paul writes to the Corinthians a second time he reminds them that they

have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the all surpassing power is from God and not from us...

You are the Body of Christ ~ in cracked pots and broken vessels.

John Buchanan puts it this way:

....beneath it all is the radical notion of church as body, the provocative notion of the embodiment of religion, the essential and radical notion that this religion, this following Jesus Christ, is essentially not private but corporate. Faith in Christ creates community, connection, relationship, or it misses something absolutely essential. Beneath it all is something that confronts, contradicts, and challenges the whole culturally popular notion that religion is essentially private spirituality, that Christian discipleship is walking in the garden, alone, with Jesus. This faith of ours is personal, of course, living deeply in our souls. But it is also embodied in the beloved community into which Jesus Christ calls us and places us, his body. And this faith of ours reminds us of the richness and beauty and riskiness and passion of life intersecting with other lives. This incarnate love of God in the human life of Jesus reminds us that our creator means for us to live in relationship.

You belong to God in Christ.

You belong to one another.

Baptism is a sign and seal of that belonging.

You are gifted for the common good.

You are the Body of Christ ~ beautiful, broken, and beloved.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.