

WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.26.2020



Back to Basics: One Body, Many Members

The Reverend Anna Dickson

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Last week, we began a sermon series entitled, “Back to Basics” - it is a series that invites us to re-visit the fundamentals of who we are as people of faith - and what we do - and why it matters.

Last week’s question was, “What is the purpose of the church?” and Pen reminded us that, in every season, as everything around us changes, the essential purpose of the church never does. We are a people of resurrection hope. Over the course of the coming weeks, we will consider other questions, like why we worship, and why we reach out, and why we are Presbyterian. Today’s question is, “Why Be a Member?”

I will be upfront about my hunch that nobody ever decided to become a member of a church because they heard a persuasive argument from a pulpit about it, but rather because they experienced membership for themselves. As we get into the message this morning you’ll see why that is, and my hope is that it will serve as a springboard for the telling of those membership stories in the days and weeks ahead.

Let us listen for how God may be speaking to us today from 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verses 12-31:

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. 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The first child I ever baptized was a wide-eyed four year old who didn't absolutely hate having a few minutes to herself in the spotlight. She had been eager and



engaged the week before as we had stood on the marble steps of that sanctuary and peered into the baptismal font together, and I had explained to her what we would do that Sunday, including the part when I would dip my hands into the cool water and dribble it onto her brow in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I had done my best to explain to her that all of this meant that she was a child of God - and that that was very good news. And I assured her that we could work around her favorite sequined headband.

When the day came, I stood on that same marble step and I invited her and her parents to come forward. We went through the liturgy we had discussed as she shifted and squeaked in her patent leather shoes, and after the prayer over the water, I made my hand into a cup and brought the water to her head just as we had practiced.

And that's when she turned to me, and in one of those loud kid whispers, she said, "This is when we do the good news part, right?"

As the congregation fell into charmed laughter, I told her it was. And she turned proudly back toward them, ready to receive the blessing.

I do not remember my own baptism, but I will never forget hers, and her perfectly timed question. Because in it, she gave all of us a gift. She broke up what can often be a rote ritual with a fresh reminder that what we are enacting every time we gather around a font is good news - and that this good news is something we do not want to miss. That embedded in it is both a promise, and a call to participate in that promise.

According to the gospels, the promise is this: before we are anything else, we are beloved children of God. In baptism, we remember Jesus' own baptism, and how, as he stood there in waters of the Jordan next to his wild cousin John, the heavens broke open and the voice of God proclaimed, "This is my child, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased" - and we claim that this promise is true for us as well. God loves us and delights in us. And this is not our own doing, but is a gift of grace, an invitation to share in Christ's life and in his sufferings and, ultimately, in his resurrection hope.



If that is all that my young friend helped us pause to consider on her baptism day, that would surely have been gift enough. But what has stuck with me over the years is that this little child, who was certainly a unique, budding personality, full of her own quirks and abilities and opinions - don't forget that sequined headband - this little child used collective language when she posed her question. "This is when we do the good news part, right?" she said. And when she did that, she unwittingly reminded us that the life of faith is a shared enterprise.

We would do well not to miss that. Where we might have expected her to use the first person singular, she opted for the first person plural. It was almost as if she knew that what was important wasn't what I was doing, and it wasn't something that was primarily about her, but it was something that God was doing in all of us together.

When the Apostle Paul talks about membership in the body of Christ, he isn't thinking about voluntary association with an organization. For Paul, "membership" isn't about a choice to be involved in a church. It isn't even a choice at all, really. When Paul talks about membership, he is describing what he believes to be a reality: that when discover we belong to God, we necessarily discover that we belong to one another, too. We are baptized into the one body, he says, of many members, or parts - and he insists that the vitality of the whole depends on the varied gifts of all. Membership is about discovering that you belong - to God, and to others.

The thing is, we tend to learn these lessons about belonging in the reverse order. Most of the time, it is by belonging to one another, by investing in life together, that we discover an unbelievable promise to be true: that Jesus Christ really does show up where two or three are gathered -

to meet us at the point of our deepest need,

to comfort us in our deepest grief,



to challenge us to expand our perspective or increase our generosity,
to help us grow through frustration and disappointment,
and to surprise us when we have all but given up.

Paul's pastoral anxiety in 1 Corinthians 12 is not over adding numbers to the rolls. It is about inviting people to enjoy the fullness of life in Christ - and if we are going to know the full life to which Christ calls us, Paul tells us that we are going to have to learn that we need each other. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," he says, nor the head to the foot, "I have no need of you." This is a counter-cultural word in our first person singular world, I know, where "I have no need of you" is a rallying cry, a sign of strength, an organizing principle. But, at least according to Paul, our call requires a first person plural response. Because there will come a season for all of us when we will realize that we have come to the end of our own strength, that we cannot cry on our own shoulder, that we need the wisdom and compassion of others to remind us that, before we are anything else, we are beloved children of God, and that God intends to use our gifts to nurture the life of the world that God so loves, whatever those gifts may be.

Paul calls us to membership because he doesn't want us to miss out on the blessing of being part of the body of Christ, where all gifts are needed, and the weak are indispensable. Because in the body of Christ, the church, we suffer together, and we rejoice together, and we show up for one another as if our life depends on it, because in a sense, it does.

A few years ago, I was visiting with a couple in my last congregation when their neighbor, a Jewish man several inches shorter than I am, knocked on the door. He came in with a fresh loaf of bread and a story to tell as we broke it - a story, he said, he could tell because of the love of his friends. The man had grown up in Germany, and he told me that when he and his friends had been rounded up into the concentration camp, the guards would call them out to the yard every morning, and line them up, and find the weakest-looking one in the bunch, and send him to the chambers. Overnight his slight stature had become a matter of



life and death. And so, every morning, when they were called out to the yard to line up, his friends would pack in tightly together, shoulder to shoulder, and they would hold him up, so that as the guards passed, they would pass right over him - a boy just as tall and hardy as the rest. And they did this day after day until they were liberated together.

We are called to a membership like that. It is a call to live as if we belong to one another, because we do, and in living this way, to discover that we belong to God. Here in Paul's ancient words is a fresh invitation into deeper living through participation in Christ: where the joy you share is multiplied, the sorrow you bear is shouldered, and you are lifted up, where you do not belong by virtue of sponsorship or status or by what you can do, but where you are called to share what you have to offer in the faith that it is not only useful to others - it is vital to the whole....and it is vital to you.

This morning, at each service, we baptized a new little life into the body of Christ. We claimed for Charlie at 9 and [will for] Camby [at 11] the promise that they are beloved children of God - no doubt with their own quirks and abilities and opinions - and we promised to nurture them in the faith, to celebrate and welcome their gifts, in the hopes that they, too, will one day use them in the first person plural response to God's call.

So now, my friends, members of the body, this is when we do the good news part. This is when we show up for these little ones, so that in belonging to God's people, they might know that this good news is something they do not want to miss.

To God be the glory, now and forevermore. Amen.

