

Jan. 23, 2022 Epiphany 3C
1 Cor. 12:12-31
We're All in this Together

Today's readings give us good opportunity to talk about "the church." Think about how we use that word. "We're going to church." "Are you having a church wedding?" "That's a beautiful church."

A usual starting point is to declare that the place where we worship is not the Church. Rather, this building is a structure in which the Church gathers for worship and praise and strength and renewal and for inspiration to become more fully what the Church is – the body of Christ.

We remember, too, that the pastor and the Discipleship Vision board are not the Church. Sunday School teachers are not the Church. Lay ministers are not the Church. The altar guild, acolytes, and lectors are not the Church. No one person, no one group, and no one activity can become the Church for us. The Church IS the body of Christ.

In today's Epistle, we received a reminder from St. Paul that all together we, the Church, are, in fact, "the body of Christ and individually members of it."

But before we dig into that, let me give you a couple of more church analogies to spark your brain. In John 15, Jesus talked about the church as a vine. He is the Vine. We are the branches. Everyone connected to Him is the Church.

One of my favorite analogies to use for the church is an ice cream sundae. You takes things that are cold, hot, sweet, salty, crunchy and soft—vastly different things—and you put them together to make something wonderful. That's the Church.

The Church is NOT something to belong to. Nevertheless, sometimes people talk about joining the Church like they do about joining the Rotary Club or the PTA or the Boy Scouts or the Girl Scouts. Those who do affiliate with such organizations pay dues to them, attend meetings when they feel like it, and turn in their membership cards when they grow tired of the organization's activities or become angry at what it does or the changes it makes. The Church, committed to God, is very different, of course. It is – we are – the body of Christ.

Neither is the Church something to watch on television as interested spectators. For us, the Church is participatory. We are necessarily partakers and contributors. We are not like the audience at a concert, but we are like members of the orchestra making the music – God’s music to which we dance in our daily lives, following Jesus and living out His mission.

We are the body of Christ, and each of us individually is a member of it. But we are not individuals WITHOUT the body – only WITHIN it. In a way, our faith and tradition create a certain conflict with the rugged and independent-minded individualism that has formed so much of the American culture. We are not Christians alone; we are not separate actors choosing our own views without reference to the faith. Always, we are together – parts of the whole. And our congregations, the Church, are part of the body of Christ.

St. Paul drives home this point as he expands his view of the body of Christ by using the image of a human body. He enlightens us with telling examples of its parts – hand, ear, eye, nose, feet, and head. Each has its special function. As we consider what we are as the Church, we do well to remember this. As different parts of a human body make their contributions, each of us finds a particular contribution to the Church, finding a ministry that suits us and complements the others.

And, we expand these ministries beyond the confines of the congregation as we all apply our ministries in making the work of Christ effective in our daily lives for the sake of all around us.

But, we dare not forget to balance these individual roles following another aspect of St. Paul’s analogy. It takes all parts of a human body working together to produce the functioning of a healthy one. We must work together, recognizing the equal importance of all ministries and all members and all people. St. Paul illustrates this in language we can never forget. “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.’” Each, he insists, is equally indispensable. All of us, doing our parts, are indispensable.

And, we must also expand this view beyond the confines of the Church. In the broken and fearful and often desperate world in which we live, conflict and contention and extremism and lack of civility on many sides seem to have become the rule instead of the exception. Far too often, people in all

sections of our country and of the world choose sides, ascribe to an “us versus them” mentality, and draw lines in the sand. How can we take Paul’s wisdom that no one can say “I have no need of you” and extend it to all people and all places to make this sense of Christ-like unity understood and accepted?

As the body of Christ, we are the activity and the continuing presence of Jesus in the world. We become the Resurrection. The Church is the means by which Christ remains involved in the world. So, we, His body, are Christ’s representatives on earth.

We, the Church, are Christ for others – at work, at home, at school, in the community, and in the life of our congregations.

It might help today to remind ourselves what we say ourselves as the church. We are known by love. We live by faith. We are a voice of Hope.

When we ask, “How does the Church pursue its mission?” The church pursues its mission by being known by love, living by faith and being a voice of hope.

The various ministries that we employ as part of the Church allow us to engage in the great mission of the body of Christ, following the challenges that Jesus lays before us. They represent how we actively serve as Christ’s continuing presence in the world.

What our world needs is for us to be the body of Christ. And how we begin to do that might well be found in today’s Gospel. The very first thing Jesus did as He began His ministry was to go into the midst of the community in which He had lived His entire life and declare what the world needed. He did so by reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

How do we, as the continuing body of Christ, in our time and our places do what Jesus read about? How, in word and in action, do we “bring good news to the poor?” How do we, in word and in action, “proclaim relief to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind?” How do we, in word and in action, “let the oppressed go free?”

We do it by being the body of Christ—church. A fearful and anxious world, filled with far too many people who are hungry and oppressed, wounded and hopeless, await an answer from the Church – from us – the body of Christ.

One more analogy before we stop. In the St. Louis Cathedral in St. Louis, Missouri there is a beautiful mosaic on one wall—a picture made out of little pieces of tile and rock and glass. When you stand back and look at it from a distance, it is beautiful. But if you get right up next to it and look at the individual tiles, you see the smudges and the cracks and the imperfections. That is the church.

Your smudges and cracks and imperfections have all been taken to the cross and redeemed by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. Jesus' body was hung on a cross to win forgiveness for you and to make you the body of Christ.

Let's be the body of Christ.

Amen.