

¹²For 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. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose....²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

This is the word of the Lord

SECOND READING: Exodus 19:3-6

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³Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: ⁴You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. ⁵Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, ⁶but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

FIRST READING: John 17:9-11, 20-21

⁹I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. ¹⁰All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. ¹¹I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of ^[a] your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one....²⁰“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

*“*The Body of Christ*”

*“*You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*” It is one of Paul’s most famous and spectacular metaphors, and it is used to teach various principles. One is that all people have different gifts which can be contributed to the church, and another is that all parts of the whole have equal importance and should be respected as such. But this text also teaches us that Christians, despite our differences, are united in our purpose of representing Christ and his way in the world. (repeat) “*You are the body of Christ and individually members of it*”.

*When Paul wrote about a body, its ears, eyes and nose, we need realize that he was coming from the perspective of a Jewish scholar for whom Genesis 1, the Creation story, was always in the background. And it was his foundational belief that in and through the Messiah, God was creating a new, a true humanity. With this metaphor, Paul was saying then that all of us who belong to the Messiah, those in whom the holy spirit lives, are a new creation.¹ *Paul does not say that we are LIKE the body of Christ. He says we ARE the body of Christ. Period. Together we, though many, are bound by the Spirit and reflect what the Messiah is all about, his new message of forgiveness, freedom, love and eternal life.

Now, it doesn’t always feel like we, Christians, are bound together....we’re all of us so very different and so separate. *Unity and diversity in the faith community seem sometimes like contradictory terms. Whether we’re talking about the community of a particular church, a committee for instance, or whether we’re talking about the members of the World Council of churches, the terms seem to contradict each other. Whether we’re talking about Christians together in a local, civic organization or Christians speaking out on the national or international scene, unity and diversity seem contradictory. In his book, *The Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer says that this is because “*most of us have a romantic notion of what community is and this gets in our way.*” We think that community is a retreat where like-minded people comfortably exist together. “*But,*” he says, **“REAL community IS that place where the person you least want to live with always lives, and it is where, if they move away, another just like*

¹Tom Wright. “*Paul for Everyone. 1 Corinthians*” (Louisville: WJKP; 2003), 158-162.

*them comes to take their place. (pause) ***“Real community IS where we give ourselves up to the working of the Holy Spirit by learning how to live with people we may not like or be like.”***

“What better way,” he asks, “to open ourselves up to the God beyond our knowing than to begin with the neighbor beyond our knowing? What finer way to learn about the reconciling power of Christ than to test it in his body of infinite variety?”²

*****No, unity and diversity are not contradictory terms. In fact, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, *“Our survival, as Christians, actually depends not our sameness but on our differences”*.³ This is because our differences are essential to our Christian witness. Just think, we cannot witness the ways of God in our lives if we let differences of ideology, politics, race, gender, economics, nationality, physical or mental abilities, etc, become barriers...or if, from these differences we create hierarchies, “better thans”, within our communities. Nor can we represent to the world Christ’s core value of loving neighbor as self if we are seen as a collection of denominations which are divided and distrustful of one another. Others watch and learn, you know. We can’t witness the peace of the Kingdom if we denominationally spend our time assuming we have a corner on some truth and attacking others who don’t have the same exact perspective.⁴ We can only witness if we are unified, taking seriously our roles as essential parts of Christ’s body together and seeking Jesus’ foundational message and bearing it out. That is, respecting and honoring all people, caring earnestly for the weak and suffering, offering hospitality to the stranger and outcast, working for justice and peace for everyone. *****I love Rev. John Buchanan’s assessment, *“It almost seems preposterous but the church IS REALLY God’s alternative to the world’s propensity to divide and contend and fight along lines of tribe, clan, race, religion. The church, the whole, united church, represents God’s precious alternative vision.”*⁵ Different but together, we ARE the body of Christ and individually members of it. (repeat and long pause)

What an amazing gift this is....our unity in diversity. And, you know, we need celebrate it.

*****One way we can celebrate it is by coming to the Table. For here we meet the living Lord, the

² Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers* (New York: Crossroads Pub, 2000).

³ Barbara Brown Taylor. *“Deep in Christ’s Bones”* In: *Bread of Angels*. (Boston: Cowley Pub; 1997), 85-90.

⁴ John Buchanan. *Sermon: “Becoming the Body”* <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/1998?100498.html> (accessed 9-28-17).

⁵ John Buchanan.

real spiritual presence of Christ. We encounter him as the Host, the One who has prepared the feast, and the One who so joins himself with us in it that he becomes the very nourishment and food for our souls.⁶ (What do we pray? *“Pour out your Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and wine that they be for us the body and blood of our Lord”*). Yes, friends, Jesus joins himself with us so that we may share in his life and in the lives of each other. His presence surrounding us, nourishing us, supporting us...it’s nearly palpable. And all of us, all of us, believers across time and place, are empowered at the Table to go out, strong and united, to do his work.

*Today, brothers and sisters, on this World Communion Sunday, we gather at the Table with millions and millions of other Christians. With different histories, cultures and languages, on different continents and in different time zones...amid organ and trumpet and brightly colored vestments, and also amid modest simple trappings...believers everywhere are encountering the living Lord and hearing his words, *“This is my body”*. *They were heard already in sun-bleached churches in Kunnamkulam, South India, and WILL be heard in mountain Presbyterian Church of Honolulu. *Sometime while we were sleeping, they were heard in thatched-roof mission stations in the Pacific islands, *and in the open-air huts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, *They were said in the magnificent cathedral of the Holy Resurrection in Jerusalem *and in the Greek Orthodox church on the West Bank. *And in US army tents or in the field in Iraq, South Korea, and Afghanistan, *“This is my body”* was heard.

We celebrate our membership in Christ’s Body, Christ’s Body of infinite variety, at the Table. We also celebrate whenever we look around and simply appreciate this reality in our daily lives. *I will never forget my visit to the missionary nurse hostel on the grounds of the Church of South India Hospital in Codocal. *The nursing students living there could not have been much more than 17 or 18 years old. They had left their homes in the rural areas of India to attend a brand new 2 yr training program. They would eventually go back into their communities, to provide the only health care the people there might ever receive. Many of the young women were getting special training in the care of AIDS patients because the AIDS

⁶Book of Confessions, 3.21.

epidemic in India was not acknowledged let alone attended to by the government. I had been told about these “children”, as the Medical Director endearingly called them. “They,” he said, “had really surprised him” for he’d expected that they’d not be able to handle their course load nor the extent of suffering and death that they would see. However, at the 6 mo mark, their tests not only reflected their subject knowledge but their enormous commitment and deepening faith!

I came to understand exactly what he was speaking about during my first night at the Hostel. It was quiet and very dark as I lay in my bed, and there was not much breeze coming through my open window. Then out of the silence, I began to hear these girls sing. First one voice, then another, then another until all were eventually singing...in harmony. Their sweet voices wafted out into the sultry, tropical air. They did not sing popular hit songs from the Indian youth culture. They sang hymns. They sang in Malyalum and because I recognized the tunes, I played them over in my head in English. And it occurred to me that likely a century or more ago, some English missionary had taught these “hymns of the church” to their faith community, just as my parents and grandparents had learned them and taught them to me. We were different in so many ways, the girls and I, age, language, economics, education, culture, not to mention living 10,000 miles apart, but we had the same purpose for living, and in that equatorial night, we were one. Their favorite: “Blessed Assurance”. Enikku pattum, prasamsayum Daivakunjadum than kurisum. They sang long into the night and brothers and sisters, I fell asleep there, not only in my bed, but in my church.

*****Friends, we, the Church, are God’s alternate vision for this divided and broken world. We are God’s new creation, different yet one in Christ, and we cannot witness without living into this. By the power of the Spirit let’s give thanks then, let’s come to the Table. Let’s look around at our lives and celebrate! *****And then let’s go from here together to be *the body of Christ and individually members of it*”. Amen