



"DISCIPLE: Embrace the World"

Fall Sanctuary Worship Sermon Series – No. 5
Sermon by Rev. Robert English

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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.

We live in an age where we are more connected to the world than ever before, through the advancement of technology, social media, and these portable universe controlling devices we call cell phones. We are more connected to the world than any other generation of human beings to ever walk upon the face of this beautiful and wondrous planet. And this brings with it some tremendous blessings.

We have connections to people from our past which during a different age would have faded away over time, yet, because of our social media we still have the chance to celebrate anniversaries, birthdays, and deaths. There are people who I feel connected with, people who I celebrate with even though I haven't talked with them or seen them in years. And yet, when I see a post about the birth of their child, or their graduation from grad school, my heart leaps with joy, I say a prayer of gratitude and I walk a little lighter the rest of the day.

As with all things human, though there is a shadow side to this hyper-connectivity. There is the extreme isolation people feel because their only real connection to others is through a glowing screen. There is anonymous trolling and cyber bullying which bypasses the empathy we learn from actually seeing the pain we cause on the face of one another. There are the reactive and divisive posts during a heated political season, when everyone seems to have their own virtual soap box they're willing to pull out from time to time without actually engaging in a conversation, dialogue or discourse.

There is this new phenomenon of mass grieving which happens when we experience a tragedy like a mass shooting, a terrorist attack, or another police shooting and conversations of racial tension.

In the wake of these events it seems as though we are bombarded with all the different feelings associated with the grieving process, anger, blaming, denial, and depression; mixed with a whole lot of shoulds: like here's what you should be doing because you aren't doing enough; like if you aren't processing this the way I am then you're doing it wrong; like if you aren't reacting to these things this exact way then you are somehow less than human or you aren't compassionate enough

I don't know about you but sometimes I just feel as though I have to disconnect from it all because it all feels like it's just too much to bear. Sometimes I just feel this urge or need to build up barriers around me to protect myself from this world because it just feels like a really scary place. Sometimes it feels like the world is too big a burden for me to carry so I might as well throw in the towel, disengage, and go about my own business.

Today is our fourth sermon in our series on being a disciple, a follower of Jesus in this crazy and wacky time in which we live. Our theme for today is DISCIPLES: Embrace the World.

The lesson this morning comes from one of the letters of St. Paul to the church in Corinth. It is a fairly well known passage where Paul offers a vision of the church which continues to influence and inspire us today. Paul writing to the Corinthians calls the church the body of Christ which exists in the world. One of the things I truly believe about the Bible is that it is the inspired word of God.

What I mean by this statement is there's a lot of human stuff in the scriptures, but there are also these moments, these passages, and these images which resonate over the ages as a timeless beautiful truth. There is this sense that behind these ordinary words is the extraordinary movement of the Holy Spirit bringing together an idea which will help to shape and transform the hearts of disciples generation after generation after generation. In other words, sometimes we get it right.

Sometimes we are able to tap into that which is greater than us and put just the right words to it for others to say another way, yes, that's it that is truly of God. This is one of those passages for me. In this section of the letter Paul begins by talking about the sacrament of baptism. Paul, along with the early church leaders, gave shape to our understanding of baptism, passed down over the years which we carry to this day. Through the waters of baptism we enter into the larger body of Christ.

It is through our baptism that we lose a part of our worldly identity, all those labels we assign to ourselves to differentiate and separate us, and we gain a new identity as a member of the body of Christ. Back in Paul's day it was Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

Today we could use any number of different labels we have which are prominent throughout our world, the labels of national identity, political affiliation, or economic status. **In our baptism we die to those other ways of being in the world and are made a new creation as a part of the body of Christ in the world.**

In baptism, being a part of the church, means that we become immersed in that which is bigger and greater than us alone, we let go of some of our own will and ways of doing things, trusting that there is something else at work in and through this weird thing called church, that is more than us alone.

Every time we baptize someone here in this sanctuary, on these chancel steps, it is a humbling and awesome experience for through this ordinary tap water God does something absolutely extraordinary, God welcomes them home into the body of Christ which exists in every corner, of this world.

Paul's vision for the church is so incredible because it is both awe inspiring and super practical. It emerges as he is writing to the Corinthian Church which was a church divided into all these little subgroups, each following their own teacher. Paul calls them back into unity and interdependence by tapping into this one common human characteristic, when our self-pity and insecurity, leads to self-righteousness.

There's this great part in the text where Paul says we can't all be the eye of the body, we can't all be the hand, someone has to be the ear and the foot. If the body were an eye where would the hearing be and if the body were a foot where would the seeing be?

As someone who lives in the church world, maybe a little bit too much, I hear this all the time from various local church communities. If only we could be like this church with the cool band and all the millennials; if only we could be like that church over there with all the families and kids; if only our youth group were like that massive one down the street where they have pizza and Minecraft parties every other Sunday; if only we had the really cool hip associate pastor with all the social media references; then we would be growing, then we would be worthy of grace, **then we could actually make a difference in this world.**

And sometimes instead of embracing those other churches around us, we get really uppity about our own theology or tradition. Well they may have the big church or the cool this or that but we have the United Methodist Hymnal, so there.

Paul reminds us that it is God who arranges the body, it is God who breaks down all the conditions we would place on our existence, and it is God who calls to us and makes our work holy, it is God who partners with us in transforming this world.

Paul tells us that we aren't all called to one type of ministry, we aren't all called to be one type of church. Paul reminds us that we aren't like the suburbs of North Scottsdale Arizona, where every house is exactly the same. Our churches aren't intended to be cookie cutter.

No, Paul tells us that each member of the body has value and importance because each member is absolutely necessary for the whole body to function. We need toenails, we need nose hair, we need finger joints and those little tiny bones in your middle ear.

All of it works toward the betterment of the whole body of Christ, and the body of Christ works toward the betterment of the whole world.

See the church doesn't exist for you and me, the church isn't about you and me, it exists to be the body of Christ in the world proclaiming the Good news of God's grace for all people and working for peace with justice.

So the next time you get overwhelmed with the burdens of the world, the next time you just want to shut it all off and disengage, take a deep breath and remember that the world has a savior and it isn't us, remember we are called to pick up our cross, not THE CROSS, every day and follow as best we can, but it's not up to us alone. Remember that in those places encased with darkness that there are people who are carrying the light of God's love. Remember that the body of Christ is out there in the world, hands and feet, toenails and all, mobilizing to bring healing and hope to those in dire circumstances, those who feel helpless, hopeless and alone. Remember that we are just one community among millions offering our prayers and prayerful action on behalf of the most vulnerable and marginalized among us.

Remember that we are one body, you and me and the person down the pew that you struggle to love, just as we eat of this one loaf and drink from this one cup, for through the power of the Holy Spirit we are one in ministry to all the world. Embrace it don't shy away from it. And if you feel like you just can't, know that we can and will, with God's help. Thanks be to God.

Notes:

The DISCIPLE sermon series is drawn from the work of Martin Thielen in A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. Compiled by Jessica Miller Kelley. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.