

One Body

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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On this World Communion Sunday, I want to ask a very simple question. What is the church?

Is it a community? A cultural institution? A Jesus-y non-profit?

Increasingly, in our time, it seems that a common answer, no matter what we might officially say, is... a product.

I regularly talk to people from other churches. Some of these are close friends, some are more distant acquaintances. Usually, when talk turns to church, or if I say, “tell me about your church or your worship today,” the responses start to sound an awful like a product review.

The sermon was good, but the music was too loud. Or too quiet.

The music was inspiring, but the sermon was boring.

The announcements went too long. The person doing this or that part of the service was “off their game” today.

So-and-so was dressed a bit too casually for my liking. Or a bit too formally.

The service lacked enthusiasm. Or was too enthusiastic. Or the tech was glitchy. Or the kids were too loud.

Obviously, there are as many opinions about the products as there are people.

But is church a Sunday morning product? Is this the right way to think about who we are and what we do when we gather to worship each week?

Our text this morning gives us a very different picture of the nature of the church and our role within it.

We are given the picture not of the church as a weekly religious performance that is to be marketed to a target audience, but of a *body*.

Paul talks about *members* not *consumers*. To the church in Corinth, Paul says: “You are the body of Christ.”

It’s worth pondering the nature of the first recipients of these words. Even if we only rewind one chapter to 1 Corinthians 11, we see this is a church struggling with sexual immorality, a church that is bickering, that is characterized by infighting, divisions, abuse and neglect of the poor, bad theology...

To *this* church, Paul says... “You are the body of Christ. You need each other. Each part is essential. Collectively, you represent Jesus!”

The church as “the body of Christ” is a familiar metaphor that applies on a number of levels.

First, we could think on the level of individual congregations.

We, here at Lethbridge Mennonite church are the body of Christ. We are a small community seeking to embody the way of Jesus and represent him in our city.

The broader Mennonite church is also the body of Christ. We are no longer a body of only European-ish people. Over the past 500 years, we have become a global family of faith.

We need the whole Mennonite body. We need to listen to our Mennonite sisters and brothers from other parts of the world and not assume that we in the West are the ones that have all the answers.

We could also think about the “body of Christ” on a more global level. And of course, World Communion Sunday is a good day to do this!

I've talked about this often over the years. It is important to understand who we are as Mennonites, to understand our history, our theology, etc.

But it is *just* as important to understand that Mennonites are not the one and only true shining light of God's family, that there are some things that others might see more clearly than us, that we have things to learn from our sisters and brothers from other denominations.

We are part of a very large and diverse global body, and we each contribute something unique in our worship, in our theology, in our expression of our understanding of the big story of which we are all a part.

Just as Paul reminds the Corinthians that not all are prophets, teachers, administrators, speakers in tongues, etc. in the *local* church, so in the *global* family of faith, we do not all perform the same role.

A number of years ago, we gathered as members of the Downtown Churches Ministerial. For the opening, the representative from the Roman Catholic read this reflection:

When God puts us back together again, this great church will be marked by the dignity and scholarship of the Anglicans, the order and sacraments of the Roman Catholics... the Presbyterian desire for good preaching, the Lutheran respect for sound theology.

There will be the Baptist concern for individual salvation, the Congregational respect for the rights of lay members, the Pentecostal reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit and the Quaker appreciation for silence.

We will find there the Mennonite sense of community, the social action of the Salvation Army, the social justice of the United and the Reformed love of the Bible, all wrapped in Orthodox reverence before the Mystery of God.

A good picture of the body of Christ—with each member doing its unique part, collectively expressing what no individual member (or denomination) could do on its own.

Now, I know that some of you have heard many sermons on the church as the body of Christ and that you may be thinking, “OK, I get the image, I understand what the passage is saying...

.... but if we are the body of Christ, why don’t we *look* more like the body of Christ? Why is the body of Christ sometimes so unattractive? Why do Christians sometimes behave in such ugly ways towards each other?

Why do we seem to so often do *precisely* what Paul warns against in this passage?

Paul says in verse 21 that “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.”

But is this not *exactly* what we so often do?

We disagree about something, and we leave. The pastor says something we don’t like, and we leave. The worship doesn’t move us, and we leave. We have an interpersonal conflict with someone in the church, and we leave.

We say, in effect, “I have no need of you.”

This is what the church too often looks like in a culture where the customer is always right and where our choices as consumers reign supreme.

What can we say about these things?

Well, I think the first thing that needs to be said is simply that, whatever the church’s failings, the church was and is a divinely instituted reality.

The body of Christ is not something that we have to manufacture on our own, it is not even something that we have to make sure that we “get right” in order for it to “work.”

The church is a creation of God.

Of course, we must always strive for unity, we must always work to reflect the nature of this body, but we will never get it exactly right, and God knows this.

There will always be critics of the church. Sometimes their criticisms will be justified and will represent a prophetic word to the church to repent; sometimes they will be not much more than product reviews.

Whatever the case may be, whether the body is performing well with each part fulfilling its role with wonderful efficiency and harmony or the body appears to be all out of sorts with nothing working the way it ought to, ***it remains the body of Christ.***

To repeat. The first century church in Corinth was a hardly a template for a healthy church. Yet to this unimpressive collection of sinners, Paul stubbornly insisted, “You are the body of Christ.”

We should never forget that God specializes in working through things that appear less than impressive. Indeed, this seems to be one of the main ways in which God has chosen to work throughout history!

The second thing to say is that **God has bound himself to his people**—people who abuse him, mistreat him, misunderstand and represent him poorly and inadequately to the world.

God has always placed himself in the hands of human beings—from the ancient people of Israel and their fumbling efforts to be a light to the nations, to the manger in Bethlehem, to the cross on Golgotha, to two thousand years of the church.... God has *given* himself to us, and God has *entrusted* himself to us.

Whether we are worthy of his trust or not.

So, God has bound himself to us, and God has bound us to each other.

God has not given us the option of a privatized spirituality where we contemplate divine mysteries all by ourselves or exclusively with those who are just like us.

God has set things up so that we need each other. Whether we realize it or not. Whether we *want* it or not. *We need each other.*

In a culture of individualism, a culture of consumerism, the church needs to truly *be* the body of Christ.

The world desperately needs to see a community that sticks with one another even when our preferences aren't being met, even when—*especially* when—we might annoy each other, let each other down, misunderstand each other, even mistreat each other.

Those who came to hear Mulanda Juma, MCC's representative in Burundi and Rwanda, last night.

He spoke of fleeing war in his home country and ending up in Durban, South Africa. There, he attended a church that was ninety percent white.

And he was on the receiving end of some quite appalling racism. He observed as one white church member sprayed disinfectant on all the seats that were occupied by black people after worship services. He spoke about being refused entry into a mid-week bible study. He talked about a service where someone had a "word from the Holy Spirit" during worship—a word that turned out to be that the black people were only there for the "milk and honey," in other words because they were given food.

Mulanda had *every reason* to leave this church. Indeed, he had far better reasons for leaving than many people who leave churches in the West.

It wasn't just that his consumer preferences weren't being met. His grievances were legitimate. No one would have begrudged him from moving on. Many would have encouraged it.

But he refused. He stayed. And he worked for meaningful and lasting change.

Those who were here last night, did you notice how he referred to the white folks who behaving in these profoundly un-Christian ways?

He referred to them as "sister" and "brother." That's the language he used when he was speaking about even those who were mistreating him.

That is a powerful witness to a vision of the body of Christ that goes beyond tastes and preferences. A vision that *refuses* to say, "I have no need of you." A vision that says, "You have need of me, whether you recognize it or not."

I'll close with the simple words of Mulanda spoke to us last night: **Stay in the church.** He repeated this a number of times to make sure we heard him.

Stay in the church.

Yes, there are times when we must leave **a** church.

Sometimes churches begin to teach things that are no longer recognizably Christian. Sometimes there is abuse and dysfunction that is truly intolerable and shows no sign of change. Sometimes our journeys—geographic or spiritual—lead us to new communities.

But even if there are occasionally times when we come to the decision that we must leave **a** church, this is not the same thing as leaving **the** church.

Stay in the church.

If I had heard Mulanda Juma’s presentation before our bulletin went to print, I might have made this my sermon title. “Stay in the church.”

The world desperately needs to see a community where love is real, where hard truths are told, where forgiveness is given. A community where there is a settled commitment that we are in this journey of faith and discipleship together—and that the “togetherness” is not an optional extra, but an essential part of the journey.

God has bound us to each other.

And so may we joyfully live into this reality that God has created. At the local level and at the global level.

May we truly be the one body of Christ for the sake of the world God loves.

Amen

