

SECOND READING: 1 Corinthians 12:12-18, 27

12 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. **13** 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. **14** Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. **15** 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. **16** 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. **17** 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? **18** But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.... **27** Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

This is the word of the Lord

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

9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. 11 I 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, 21 that 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. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“An Alternative Vision”

“You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” It is one of Paul’s most famous and spectacular metaphors, often read on days like today. When he wrote about a body, its ears, eyes and nose all being needed for the body’s functioning, he was calling on Christ’s followers to realize their connectedness and unity of purpose, their unity of purpose in Christ’s work on earth. Together we, though many, are connected, tied, bound by the Spirit, not LIKE the body of Christ but functioning AS the body of Christ, individually members of it.

Now, it doesn’t always seem like we, Christians, are bound together. In fact, we are frankly so far from accord and union most days, so very far. We not only experience it in smaller ways in local and national churches, we see much larger conflicts, verbal and physical happening in our community, nation and world when we see our TV screens, newspapers, and social media each day. We see humans, often Christians, in conflict, often violent conflict, grounded in the human propensity for power, revenge, for a bigger slice of the pie. Yes, we see anything but peace and unity in our world, in our country, in the church. I sometimes wonder why so much conflict, and I am reminded of the response that Historian Jon Meecham’s gave to a student who asked him once during a forum on the disunion of our country, *“Is there anything anymore that unites us?”*, the student asked. Jon said, *“You know, it’s the things that people love that unite them (repeat), and we just love too few things anymore.”*¹

He’s correct. He’s so correct. We just love too few things anymore, friends. We just love too few things. And so, it is important, today, in particular, to stop and ask ourselves, what is it that we just aren’t loving anymore? What is it that we just aren’t loving anymore? What do you think? What is it that we, as the Body of Christ, are not loving that we need to be loving more if we are to solve our problem of disunity? Well..... could it be “our neighbors”? Jesus’ last words to us were to love others as he has loved us and to be one, to be united, for others to see us, in doing this. This is what Paul was saying when he was saying that, as the Body of Christ,

¹<https://richmondforum.org/meacham-goodwin/>. Referred to in Steve Easton. *“A Table with 7,417,622,501 Seats”*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgyRmIxQLAM>. (accessed 10-1-21).

we are to reflect what Jesus is all about, each of us doing our part for the whole, witnessing to the world his message of forgiveness, freedom, and love for others.

I think then today, we need to then affirm that we cannot witness Jesus' ways if we let differences of ideology, politics, race, gender, orientation, economics, nationality, physical or mental abilities, etc., become barriers...and we cannot witness Jesus' ways if, from these differences we create hierarchies and nests for conflict. Nor can we represent to the world Christ's core value of love and care if we are divided and distrustful of one another, walling ourselves off in say out denominations, ignoring each other's needs and denying each other's perspectives. Barbara Brown Taylor says, "*Our survival, our survival, as Christians, actually depends NOT on our sameness but on our differences*".²

Right. We can only witness if we are unified, but unified in respecting and honoring all people, caring earnestly for different ideas and different ways, and then together extending a hand to the weak and suffering, offering hospitality to the stranger and outcast, working for justice and peace for everyone. John Buchanan sums this up wonderfully when he says, "*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.*"³ Different but together, we ARE the body of Christ and individually members of it. (repeat and long pause).

Now, you may wonder, in your weak moments, how it is that we avoid seeing this as ridiculous idealism. You may, at some unconscious base level think, as I sometimes do, that this vision of the "peaceable kingdom" is naïve, that violence and terror are here to stay just as is our enemy's desire for our destruction. However, when we are in these places of cynicism, we need consider the truth in the statement that "*the day we abandon our hope for a different, an alternative, vision of the world, as John Buchanan has described the church, is the day we stoop to the devil's level.*" Reinhold Niebuhr said something similar at the end of WWII amid its ruins

² Barbara Brown Taylor. "*Deep in Christ's Bones*" In: Bread of Angels. (Boston: Cowley Pub; 1997), 85-90.

³ John Buchanan. Sermon: "*Becoming the Body*" <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/1998?100498.html> (accessed 10-5-23).

and the staggering evidence of humanity's capacity for violence and destruction. He said, *"Despair is the fate of realists who know something about sin, but nothing about [the redeemed way the world can really be]."*⁴

Brothers and sisters, it is our Christian responsibility today to take this seriously, to imagine what our world would look like if we were to have a really big Table... a really, really big Table. It is our Christian responsibility today to envision what our world would look like if we were to love all of those gathered around that big Table and...also those who yet have not taken a seat at it. It is our Christian responsibility today to consider what it would take of us to fill up more seats at the Table. Do we need to become more invitational, more welcoming, not only to and within this particular community of Faith but simply to anyone to needs to come, learn of Jesus? Could it mean that we need to consider our behavior at the Table, speaking beyond our own comfortable circles, listening more, respecting more, talking less? Might it mean that we'd need to be more concerned about their voiced concerns...getting in their shoes of those who cannot do for themselves, caring for those who hurt?

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 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 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 in their clinicals. However, at the 6 mo mark, their tests not only reflected their subject knowledge but

⁴ Christine Chakoian. "God's Vision". <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/6140df216615fb2e5700006a/christine-chakoian-gods-vision> (accessed 10-1-21).

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 cot, 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. It was a ritual that I realized quickly happened every evening. They sang in Malyalum and as I listened, what occurred to me was something that occurs to me often when we sing together on Sunday mornings here, that years and years earlier some missionary had taught these “hymns of the church” to their faith community, just as they had to my parents and grandparents. 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 cot, but in my church.

Friends, we are God’s alternate vision for this very divided and broken world. And as this, we are connected, united, bound in purpose, to witness our Christ and Christ’s way of love and care for neighbor, all neighbors. So, by the power of the Spirit let’s begin by taking the bread and drinking the cup at the Table, this table, his table, a big, big table indeed. Let’s come. We are Christ’s Body, and individually members of it. Amen