

Church

Menno Mennonite Church
July 2, 2023

Purpose: To recall the supportive body of Christ in the church.

Message: As those hewn to the true vine, we are called to growth out of and through Christ.

Scriptures: Romans 12:1-18 [I will read]; Please read: John 15:1-15

Synopsis: The church (The ecclesia--the gathering) comes in many shapes. There is the sense of the church as the institution--the organization in which people gather, function, and worship together; the stuff of organization and governance. Then there is the Body of Christ, the mystical working of the Spirit that brings people together in common nurture and common care across boundaries to make us one. The former is a working of human ingenuity and has all the problems that this involves. The latter--the breathing organism of the Spirit--is that which is vested with the way of Christ and the empathy of the Spirit.

Yet, despite our best efforts to make this difference real and effective, and an eagerness to, on occasion say “well, yeah; but that is not us.”, the division between the two is neither neat nor tidy. We do well to address the paradox in the same way we encounter our own different and often contradictory behaviors: with grace, and, hopefully humility. We are invited to know that the work of the Church is only and always the working of God’s connecting Spirit, inviting us into community and healing.

Similarly, in today’s passage from Romans, the different words for love amplify and clarify each other. “Let *agape* be genuine,’ recognizing that it can be faked. Let your *agape* be sincere, like love for brothers or sisters (*philadelphia*) or like love you have for your best friends (*philostorgos*). Love them warmly, with devotion, with sincere concern for their well-being. If asked if members of their church are their friends, these Romans are not expected to say, “Well, not ‘friend friends,’ more like just ‘Facebook friends.’”

Romans 12:1-18

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,
by the mercies of God,

to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God,
which is your spiritual worship.

² Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God
-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me
I say to everyone among you
not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think,
but to think with sober judgment,
each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

⁴ For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,
⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.

⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith;
⁷ ministry, in ministering;
the teacher, in teaching;
⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation;
the giver, in generosity;
the leader, in diligence;
the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹ Let love be genuine;
hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;
¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honor.

¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.
¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another;
do not be haughty,
but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

First off: congratulations. By making it to a pew this morning, whether in real life or virtually speaking, you have accomplished something relatively rare. You have come to church. According to an ongoing 2022 Gallup poll that has been tracing religious attitudes in America since the early 1900's, 20 percent of people report attending church every week. When you look across the scale to include those who attend at least once a month, you are among about 40 percent of those who report attending church at all. For what it is worth, these numbers while decreased since the pandemic are not markedly so, but remain fairly consistent in their generally downward slope as has been the case for the last more than half century. So like I said: congratulations; here we are today together, and we are doing church. And that is something to celebrate.

I am not about to rip open to a crusading conviction of those who are not doing what they ought (not really my style after all). As frustrating as it is these patterns in church life are far bigger than any single congregation or the leavers that can be pulled to change things. While it is easy to look at the numbers and weep, and perhaps we should, that is not my purpose for this morning in any case. I would, of course, welcome everyone to come to church regularly and fully, and would welcome a broader interest in the world of faith that I love. But I am not given to hand wringing to the loss of the social popularity of the church or inclined to spend a great deal of time trying to diagnose why. There are plenty more learned and well read people who can speak to that with higher popularity. Sometimes I think the suggestions for increasing church are interesting but often find myself wondering if we are sometimes just trying to market and compete ourselves out of a situation where I am not convinced that better marketing and peppier music are going to make the difference. Instead I think there are questions that we don't always ask, and are not always ready to answer. Once we are past the usual answers around habit and expectation, or if you happen to be of our younger generation, your parents making it fairly clear that this is where you need to be, what is it about church that makes you keep coming back? What draws you to the body? Of doing the work of body together? If you are among the younger set, this might be your chance to ask and see what your parents have to say for themselves as you consider building your own set of reasons. Why this? Why now?

Since it is not fair to put such a bombshell question to you, even if you don't have to answer out loud, let me share with you my answer. I mean yes; it is our job, happily. We get to be here with you in faith, and that is a privilege indeed. But there is more than that. Short and sweet: I need you. I need you all, I need a body around me to be the person of faith that I am called to be.

Not to like me, not to accompany me, not to fill my freezer with casseroles when we are having a hard time. As great as all of that is, there is more than that. I need the body so I can be the part of the body to make me who I am. I need the body to push me, challenge me, support me, and change me so I can grow in faith. I have known the church to be the group of people most given to laughing with me when I laugh and crying with me when I cry, and sharing with me a shared commitment to considering what it means when I say time and again “Jesus Christ is Lord” for all the implications it hold. The body is critical to who I want to be.

I say this knowing full well that being body together is hard. Whether it is where 2 or 3 is gathered or where hundreds gather as we will do this week seeking to be faithful together across ideas and across lives is just hard work. The fact of the matter is that we step on each other’s toes at least as often as we ever stoop to wash each other’s feet. We have different ideas about how to follow, where the Spirit is to be found, and how to walk within the Spirit is leading in the first place. Church is hard work. Church can be messy at times. Church is where can be healed and helped, but it is also where we can be hurt in almost equal measure. We know that the institution of the church can be inalienably human, in all that this can mean. But that does not mean that I don’t still need you to help me rehearse my faith, and to connect with me in growing into that which God wants me to be. I say this for me personally, as your pastor, every bit as much as I say this as Bryce the seeking, growing person of faith.

We get ourselves in trouble as is so often the case because we are not always sure what we mean when we talk about Church. I have often found that when you encounter someone disenfranchised with THE CHURCH there is often an opportunity to listen deeply to what that means. Not only on the basic face of it, but even more deeply than that. The word Church being what it is church can mean everything from the physical structure in which you meet, to the congregation, conference, denomination all the way up the universal church that is the body of Christ. Disentangling one from the next is an important step to understand where the distress is about the nature of the essential faith or the particular color of the carpet in the education wing. More than once have I found myself in a conversation that went something like “I don’t want anything to do with the church, but I sure want to be a follower of Christ.” While I strongly suggest that the two cannot be as neatly separated as one might wish, I can understand it all the same. We are far more aware and compelled by the realities of institutional issues and challenges than we are with the promise of living into the laundry list of Paul’s ideals. Add to this the insistence that

Christian faith is a personal piety, and has more to do with my relationship and my connection to the divine or sense thereof than it does with my connection to the body, I don't struggle to understand why the surveys say what they do.

How do we respond? First, we must say this: the church is nothing if not human. Therefore it will always fall short of all that it is supposed to be. It will sin. We know this personally as followers of Christ, and the church is, well, us. If we were not human there would not be a need for grace, for saving, and for learn along the way. It is a bit odd to think that the foibles of the institution might be part of its power—ideally it allows a space for grace to be demonstrated when things do go wrong. As frustrating as it is, and as impatiently as I can sometimes wait for the church to be the body I wish it could be and am convicted it ought to be, my demanding perfection of the church lest I write it off as a hopeless collection of hypocrites is to imply that I expect the same of myself--a perfection of thought and a consistency of action that leaves me somehow blameless before the God. All this stuff that Paul rattles off so fast he can hardly get everything written down fast enough are things around which and toward which I strive, and the church strives and reminds us that we are here to share grace with one another to the best way we can. Does this mean that we don't call out bad behavior when it is there or fail to confess that which we have done or left undone to the destruction of others? Absolutely not. We confess as we must because we can only be the incarnational body of the living God if we are willing to look at our pain and correct our mistakes. But always with grace. Always with the assurance of the great God who comes to us and makes us better even in spite of our human nature. Even as I say this, I do so in full consciousness that church is not a safe place for all people, and I claim a grace filled church advisedly as a person of relative power. I hold these realities in tension, even as I attempt to hold up the ideal and the reality of the church at the same time.

Even as we recognize that humanness of the church though we cannot limit ourselves to only that. The church is a Spirit container and as such, the church is not up to us alone. It is also the incarnation of the same Spirit that founded it at the very first. Writer and priest Richard Rohr points out that during Paul's lifetime the Church was not an institution in any way that we would recognize it. There was no organization. There was no centrally accepted set of beliefs and practices to define it (that came around the year 325 and later). Church where the incarnational experience of the Spirit in the local context, showing itself in real changed lives. The church was

doing all the thing that are being rattled off here as a working of the Spirit. The church is doing that which they are doing because the working of the Spirit. It was true then. It is true now.

Just an aside: Chapter 12 here is where things are starting to get wound up after a fairly lengthy and involved illustration of life and the living of the Spirit. He is starting to wind things down to move to a conclusion. Yet the advice about living peacefully, the advice that we value so dearly as our own is right next to the vision of the church. To be sure, it is a rephrasing of everything that the church is to be about, but there is something to be said for knowing the life of non resistance is tied also to the basic vision of the church.

Paul's brilliant metaphor for this living, organic, concrete embodiment is "the Body of Christ"; Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit, because all those parts make up a single body, so it is with Christ. We are so accustomed to hearing the metaphor of the body as a rephrasing of the laundry list of things that need doing about the church that we are not always ready to hear that which lies at the center. If Christ is the head, then, I think, the Spirit is the blood. Pumping its life-giving sustenance to all in need. That must be kept in mind. The church is the body to which we belong, but the work, the life, the presence is never ours, but lies well outside ourselves. The Spirit does what we cannot, and prays where even our words fail us. Why can it not also sustain us when the body fails too?

The church is work. It is hard. But it is not solely ours. It is not singularly ours to sustain or let go, but it is the work of God who is beyond us. We abide in Christ and Christ in us, in spite of us, and accomplishes that which God is doing in the world. So the church is us, yes, but is the binding of the Spirit and the working of God's will in us, come what may. Our work is to abide in the vine, being led and nourished to bear the fruit God has for us to bring into the world the God loves.

May this be our promise as we seek God's will. Amen.