

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany – January 23, 2022
The Church as the Body of Christ; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning I want to begin with our passage from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which is a continuation of last week's lesson. As you probably know, Paul was a missionary who traveled widely, preaching the good news of Christ and forming groups of converts in many places. About 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Paul arrived in the important cosmopolitan city of Corinth. He remained there for 18 months and started a church. Paul then continued his travels. He wrote letters to the Corinthians in response to questions they had and concerning problems in their church, as well as general teaching about Christian faith and life. Some of this correspondence has been preserved in the New Testament, in the writings known as 1 and 2 Corinthians. These letters cover a broad list of concerns: Christian leadership, communal life, sexuality, worship practices, correct theology, authentic ministry, and more.

In last week's passage from First Corinthians (12:1-11) Paul spoke about the many gifts of the Holy Spirit given to followers of Jesus. Like God's other gifts – physical strength, intelligence, artistic ability, any in-born human potential – the glory of the gift belongs to God the giver, not to the human being who has received God's gift. This may be viewed as a call to humility. Humility is not about denying the gifts we have been given. It's about honoring the gifts God has given us by acknowledging them and using them, not to build up the self but to serve the common good, for the building up of God's community in the world.

In this morning's lesson we hear Paul reflect on the church as the body of Christ. We are very familiar with this metaphor used to describe people who gather as followers of Jesus and go out into the world in Jesus' name. To put the metaphor in the context of Paul's theology, earlier in this letter he explains that God is the head of Christ, and that Christ is the head of human beings. The "head" may be viewed as the authority or master of the body, the body's most divine part. The church as the body of Christ has Christ as its head or divine master.

Let me say a word about what Paul does not say about the church. He does not say that it is like other human organizations. He does not compare the church to a political organization or a social organization or a special interest group with leaders who are essentially like all the members of the group. He says that the church is like a human body, a living organism in which all the parts – which are very different from each other – must work together to sustain life, a living body whose head is God in Christ.

Paul challenges the Corinthians – and us – to see that all the members are equally important parts of Christ's body. Each part contributes to the living organism through the particular gifts God has given to each. All members are necessary and valuable, and all are needed to work as well as they can. No member of the body can say, "I have no need of you" to another member. The parts of the body are so joined together that "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

In this metaphor of the church as the body of Christ Paul is giving the followers of Jesus an ideal, a picture of what the church should be or might be, not necessarily what the church is. The church can be wonderful, even glorious. We wouldn't be gathered here today if we didn't know the value of the church. But it can also be far less than wonderful, sinful, and even evil. Whatever the church is, it is not God. May God be found in and through the church? Yes! But is the church God? No! Ultimately, our souls long for God. In the words of Psalm 42: "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" Our souls are not ultimately satisfied by the church. Our souls will be satisfied only by God.

This week as I thought about preaching today, my mind returned again and again to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. We are all familiar with her amazing work among the dying poor in India and with the religious order she founded – the Missionaries of Charity – dedicated to this work. She received the

Nobel Prize for Peace and has been honored as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church. Imagine her for a moment. You may picture her smiling, radiant face. Surely this was a woman who knew God! She attended Mass daily. She prayed fervently. She was devoted to the church and utterly committed to the work Jesus had called her to do. What was her experience of God like? What was her spiritual experience?

After Mother Teresa's death her private papers and letters were collected and published in a book called "Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light." This is not an "easy read" by any means, but it is very interesting. As a young nun Mother Teresa had an experience of complete union with our Lord. A spiritual marriage. She wrote, "the sweetness and consolation and union of those 6 months passed but too soon." Then she began the work in India that she knew God wanted her to do. The work grew, and the religious order grew. But Mother Teresa's inner life was darkness. Let me share with you a few of her own words from a letter she wrote to her priest in 1961:

"Now Father ... this terrible sense of loss – this untold darkness – this loneliness – this continual longing for God – which gives me that pain deep down in my heart.... From my childhood I have had a most tender love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament – but this too has gone. I feel nothing before Jesus – and yet I would not miss Holy Communion for anything. ... I want only God in my life. Before I could spend hours before Our Lord – loving Him – talking to Him – and now – not even meditation goes properly – nothing but "My God" – even that sometimes does not come. Yet deep down somewhere in my heart that longing for God keeps breaking through the darkness." [Pages 208 to 214]

This deep loneliness and pain, this unfulfilled longing for God continued for many years. Would you say that God had abandoned Mother Teresa? Would you say that Mother Teresa had "lost" God? That her soul stopped growing during her years of dark and dry spiritual experience? No. Her priest assured her that the sign of God's hidden presence in her darkness was her very thirst for God and her craving for a ray of God's light.

Reading about Mother Teresa's experiences gives us a new perspective on the spiritual life and the path of following Jesus. We may thank God with all our hearts for whatever sweet consolation we have been given by God's grace. It is good to remember how we have been touched by God. But we must not be surprised if our spiritual consolation leaves us and our spiritual practices become dry and lifeless. This is a common experience for followers of Jesus. When this happens, the wisdom of Christians who have walked the path of faith before us is that we should remain faithful, as Mother Teresa was, and wait for God. We are called to trust God and God's love whatever we feel or don't feel. And many people have found that in times of spiritual dryness the faith of others in the church is a support and inspiration.

St. Paul has given us a compelling metaphor for the church as the Body of Christ. Another Saint Teresa – St. Teresa of Avila – a 16th century Spanish nun who worked tirelessly to reform the church she loved, is credited with saying this to the followers of Jesus in her day:

"Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which He looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes. You are His body. Christ has no body now but yours."

Guided by Christ, our divine head and master, may we be faithful to the call to be his body in this time and place. Amen.