

Luke 4: 14-21

THE DAY PAUL WAS INSPIRED TO COMPARE THE CHURCH TO A HUMAN BODY, HE GAVE US AN IMAGE OF OURSELVES THAT WE ARE STILL GROWING INTO. IT IS A STRONG IMAGE, BECAUSE EACH OF US IS A BODY AND WE KNOW WHAT HE IS TALKING ABOUT. IN ORDER TO PICK UP A GLASS OF ORANGE JUICE, IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO HAVE AN ARM AND FOUR FINGERS. WITHOUT AN OPPOSABLE THUMB YOU ARE LOST. LIKEWISE, DO NOT EVEN THINK ABOUT WALKING WITH YOUR INNER EAR ALL MESSED UP. THERE ARE ALL KINDS OF THINGS INSIDE OF US THAT WE NEED WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT THEM AT ALL, AT LEAST NOT UNTIL ONE OF THEM GETS SICK AND HAS TO COME OUT. FEW OF US GET UP IN THE MORNING AND THANK GOD FOR OUR COLONS, OUR COLLARBONES, OR OUR MITOCHONDRIA. WE DON'T EVEN KNOW THE NAMES OF HALF THE THINGS THAT KEEP US ALIVE, BUT THAT DOES NOT BOTHER THEM. THEY GO RIGHT ON KEEPING US ALIVE IN SPITE OF OUR ALARMING IGNORANCE ABOUT THEM.

THE HUMAN BODY HAS 206 BONES, 639 MUSCLES, AND ABOUT 6 POUNDS OF SKIN, ALONG WITH LIGAMENTS, CARTILAGE, VEINS, ARTERIES, BLOOD, FAT, AND MORE. EVERY TIME WE HEAR A SOUND; EVERY TIME WE TAKE A STEP; EVERY TIME WE TAKE A BREATH, HUNDREDS OF DIFFERENT PARTS WORK TOGETHER SO THAT WHAT WE EXPERIENCE IS A SINGLE MOVEMENT, OUR MINDS AND BODIES WORKING AS ONE UNIT. THE HUMAN BODY REPRESENTS ONE OF THE MOST COMPLEX SYSTEMS IN EXISTENCE.

THE BODY AS THE IMAGE OF THE CHURCH IS ONE OF THE POWERFUL IN SCRIPTURE. THE METAPHOR CONVEYS BOTH COMPLEXITY AND ORGANIC UNITY.

WE BELONG TO THE BODY. WE COME TO THE WATER OF BAPTISM AS INDIVIDUALS, INDEPENDENT AND RELATIVELY SELF-CONTAINED. WE COME OUT OF THE WATER CHANGED. OUR IDENTITY IS NO LONGER SOLITARY; WE CAN NO LONGER TRULY BE KNOWN WITHOUT REFERENCE TO THAT COMMUNITY INTO WHICH WE HAVE BEEN INCORPORATED: THE BODY OF CHRIST, THE CHURCH. AFTER BAPTISM, WE ARE MORE THAN JUST OURSELVES; WE ARE BY DEFINITION BEINGS-IN-RELATIONSHIP. WHERE THE SPIRIT OF GOD MOVED OVER THE FACE OF THE DEEP AND BROUGHT LIFE TO THE WORLD, THE SPIRIT OF GOD REMAINS THE SOURCE OF LIFE, THE BREATH OF THE CHURCH, MOVING AMONG US AND WITHIN US.

ONE OF OUR HUMAN NEEDS IS THE NEED TO BELONG. WE WANT TO HAVE A PLACE IN THIS EARTH. WE WANT SIGNIFICANCE. THERE IS AN EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS IN OUR SOCIETY WITH AN ESTIMATED 1 IN 4 PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM SEVERE LONELINESS. IT IS A MAJOR NATIONAL CRISIS. ONE OF THE WORSE THINGS OUR CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM CAN COMMUNICATE TO THE REST OF OUR BODY IS "YOU ARE ALONE." WE ARE NOT ALONE BECAUSE BELONGING IS THE GIFT OF BAPTISM.

AND YET THERE IS TENSION HERE. SOME PEOPLE WANT TO BELONG WITHOUT BELONGING. AS FAR AS 1 CORINTHIANS IS CONCERNED, THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BELONGING WITHOUT PARTICIPATING. LET ME REPEAT THAT: THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS BELONGING WITHOUT PARTICIPATING. THAT GOES AGAINST THE NATURE OF THE BODY. A BODY DOES NOT WORK WHEN ONE PART CHECKS OUT FOR A FEW YEARS; NOT ONLY WILL ITS FUNCTION BE UNFULFILLED, BUT THE REST OF THE BODY WILL BE THROWN OUT OF BALANCE. BELONGING IS NOT A ONE-SIDED AFFAIR. WE ARE GIVEN THE GIFT OF BELONGING AT BAPTISM, BUT WE ARE ALSO SIGNING UP FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY OF FUNCTIONING AS PART OF THE BODY OF CHRIST.

BELONGING MEANS PARTICIPATING. EVERY MEMBER OF THE CHURCH IS GIVEN GIFTS, TO BE EXERCISED FOR THE COMMON GOOD. ONE OF THE TASKS OF THE COMMUNITY IS TO DISCERN THESE GIFTS..AND TO PROVIDE WAYS IN WHICH THEY MAY BE USED. NOMINATING COMMITTEES OFTEN BECOME THE CATALYST FOR SEEKING OUT MEMBERS OF THE BODY WITH INVITATIONS TO SERVE. MY MINISTRY HAS BEEN BLESSED WITH COUNTLESS PEOPLE WHO TRULY UNDERSTAND THIS...WHO SAY 'YES' TO SERVING IN WHATEVER CAPACITY THEY CAN USE THEIR GIFTS. THEIR WITNESS HAS SHAPED MY DISCIPLESHIP. I HAVE ALSO COME ACROSS THE OPPOSITE...PEOPLE WHO WHEN ASKED TO SERVE REPLY WITH "I'VE DONE MY TIME", "I'M TOO BUSY", "I ONLY DID THAT WHEN MY KIDS WERE LITTLE" "ASK SOMEONE ELSE" THERE ARE THOSE WHO THINK WORSHIPPING IS THEIR SERVICE...DOING THEIR PART BUT DON'T ASK THEM TO SERVE IN ANY OTHER WAY. (STORY OF GUEST SPEAKER IN WORSHIP CLASS)

PAUL'S LETTER SUGGESTS THAT EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN THE CHURCH MATTERS AND IS NEEDED...THE ELDERLY, YOUNG PEOPLE, THOSE WITH DISABILITIES, AS WELL AS GENEROUS GIVERS AND HARD WORKERS. ONLY WITH ALL OF OUR MEMBERS CAN THE BODY OF THE CHURCH BE WHOLE. THIS HAS BEEN A SPIRITUAL DILEMA MY ENTIRE MINISTRY. TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY 20% OF THE PEOPLE....20% OF THE BODY DOES 80% OF THE WORK. FRIENDS, THE BODY GETS TIRED WORKING UNDER THAT KIND OF STRESS.

THIS GETS UNCOMFORTABLE FOR MANY PEOPLE. AND PERHAPS THEY LIKE IT BETTER WHEN WE TALK ABOUT THE HUMAN BODY...ABOUT LIVERS AND KNEECAPS. WHY? BECAUSE THEY REALLY DON'T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING.

THE PROBLEM BEGINS WHEN YOU PUT ME IN COMMUNITY. WHY? BECAUSE WE DO NOT HANDLE THE INFINITE VARIETY OUTSIDE OURSELVES NEARLY AS WELL AS WE HANDLE THE INFINITE VARIETY INSIDE OF US. PUT ME IN COMMUNITY AND OTHER PEOPLE CHALLENGE MY ESTABLISHED ROUTINES. I START DOING SOMETHING ONE WAY AND SUDDENLY I GET LOTS OF ADVICE ABOUT DOING IT ANOTHER WAY, OR SEVERAL OTHER WAYS, UNTIL I LOSE MY APPETITE FOR DOING ANYTHING AT ALL.

IN HIS BOOK *THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS*, PARKER PALMER DEFINES COMMUNITY AS “THAT PLACE WHERE THE PERSON YOU LEAST WANT TO LIVE WITH ALWAYS LIVES!” THE REAL PURPOSE OF COMMUNITY IS NOT TO RETREAT SOMEONE PLACE WITH OTHERS WHO ARE EXACTLY LIKE WE ARE, BUT TO GIVE OURSELVES UP TO THE WORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT BY LEARNING HOW TO FOLLOW JESUS CHRIST WITH PEOPLE WHO WE NOT LIKE AT ALL.

BEING A COMMUNITY IN CHRIST, PAUL STATES, MEANS SUFFERING AND REJOICING WITH ONE ANOTHER. THIS IS MORE THAN MAKING CASSEROLRS FOR SOMEONE IN NEED OR THROWING A BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR SOMEONE CELEBRATING. IT IS ABOUT BEING A COMMUNITY THAT SHARES ITS LIFE. MANY PEOPLE RARELY EXPERIENCE THIS KIND OF COMMUNITY. TOO MANY RELATIONSHIPS ARE FUNCTIONAL, EXISTING IN ORDER TO DO OR TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING. BUT OUR RELATIONSHIP IN CHRIST EXISTS AS THE VISIBLE EXPRESSION OF THE LOVE OF GOD, A LOVE THAT TAKES DELIGHT IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD. AS PART OF THE BODY, WE SHARE IN EACH OTHERS’ LIVES, IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD. AS WE DO, WE BECOME A TANGIBLE EXPRESSION OF GOD’S CARE.

PAUL STATES A SOLID REALITY. HE DID NOT SAY “YOU ARE *LIKE* THE BODY OF CHRIST. HE SAID, “YOU *ARE* THE BODY OF CHRIST AND INDIVIDUALLY MEMBERS OF IT.” THROUGH YOUR BAPTISM, WHETHER YOU REALIZE IT OR NOT, WHETHER YOU FEEL IT OR NOT, WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT, WHETHER YOU LIKE EACH OTHER OR NOT, WHETHER YOU LIKE THE PASTOR OR NOT, YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST AND THERE IS NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT BUT ACT LIKE IT. THE END. THIS IS NOT A BURDEN BUT A JOY....

A HYMN OFTEN SUNG IN THE METHODIST TRADITION IS ‘WE ARE THE CHURCH’..THE FIRST VERSE: ‘THE CHURCH IS NOT A BUILDING, THE CHURCH IS NOT A STEEPLE, THE CHURCH IS NOT A RESTING PLACE, THE CHURCH IS A PEOPLE. AND WHEN THE PEOPLE GATHER, THERE’S SINGING AND THERE’S PRAYING, THERE’S LAUGHING AND THERE’S CRYING SOMETIMES, ALL OF IT SAYING: I AM THE CHURCH! YOU ARE THE CHURCH! WE ARE THE CHURCH TOGETHER! ALL WHO FOLLOW JESUS, ALL AROUND THE WORLD. YES, WE ARE THE CHURCH TOGETHER! AMEN? AMEN!

