

The Body of Christ is You; The Body of Christ is Now!

1 Cor. 12:12-27, Luke 4:14-21

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I went to the same high school in Pittsburgh as the famous author Annie Dillard, whose name then was Anne Doak. She was athletic and original and brilliant back then, and as I admire her work, it's fun to say I knew her then. What I didn't know, but learned only from reading her book An American Childhood, was that, when it came to church, she was quite a rebel. As a teenager, she quit her Presbyterian church in protest against what she saw as hypocrisy, what she experienced in worship as tedium, and what she felt to be the inadequacy of answers to her questions about human suffering.

The shortcomings of church were a problem for her as they are for many today, not only all those not here, but sometimes for us too. And in that, we share with St. Paul, way back in the first century, writing to the Christian community in Corinth. His letter would have been read aloud in that church, and we heard a part of it a few minutes ago. Like Anne Doak, like many of us, at least some of the time, St. Paul must have been frustrated by what went on in churches. In Corinth, those early Christians were arguing about theology and whose was the truest. They were arguing about worship and people getting carried away and drinking too much wine at communion and about others babbling in ecstatic tongues that no one could understand – was that appropriate for worship? They were arguing about sexual morality and the role of women. And, of course, they were struggling to raise enough money to support Paul and his colleagues in their mission travels.

In his letter to Corinth, Paul tries to address and deal with these problems and questions, tries to teach and give counsel and to encourage the people in their life as a community. He expresses his frustrations but also expresses his faith and hope and love for these followers with all their many and varied gifts. Despite their troubles, despite their diversity, this is what Paul says: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it”.

And I say it to you as well: Now, you are the body of Christ! – Right here, right now – you are the body of Christ. We are the body of Christ – just as we are – strengths, weaknesses, our many gifts, our many differences – we are what God has to work with for good or for ill in shaping a world, in building community.

I think St. Paul's words come to us at an important time in our life as a parish church. Many of us are full of hope and excitement as even now, on the outskirts of Chicago, a new pipe organ begins to take shape and as drawings of a renovated chancel are refined. This project, with its full name “Lift High the Cross: Renew, Enhance, Rejoice” moves forward along with the capital campaign to fund it. Meanwhile, the Strategic Planning Team has finished over a year of intensive work on key areas of our parish life based on hours of interviews with you, the members. They have presented an impressive document to the vestry which is now available on our web site and in hard

copy in the lobby. It is a beautifully written report on both our strengths and our needed areas of improvement along with goals and suggestions for achieving them over the next few years. This report is neither a critique nor a to-do list, but rather a helpful, constructive guide into our future.

Other things to fuel hope and confidence about our life here are a number of new families coming, a jump in attendance over the last couple of months, the arrival in February of our new Music Director, Anne Timpane. She brings the prospect of a long-term, fruitful ministry of music with our choirs and all of us as we worship together. In all these ways we can be proud of ourselves – the Body of Christ indeed, growing, alive, full of promise – even St. Paul would be proud!

But aren't we also a bit like the Corinthians, a bit like churches anywhere that can sometimes drive people away, and not just teenagers. The squabbling, the doctrinal confusion, particularly when some feel so estranged that they leave our denomination, the way we sometimes say one thing and do another. In our diversity, we of course have our differences. We don't all agree that the organ and chancel changes are a good thing. We worry about raising the money and being in debt. We know the issues considered in the strategic plan are real and need to be addressed. We have had quarrels and rifts among some of us in leadership; we're working on reconciliation and better processes for managing but not stifling the vitality that is here. Money is always tight and priorities clash as we make hard choices about funding. It all gets frustrating – ask me, ask any vestry member, any committee member. Time is precious to all of us, and so many of you give so much of it – I'm sure there are times when you wonder if it's worth it and why you bother. St. Paul's frustrations with church are ours as well!

But in spite of all this, we are already, here and now, the Body of Christ! We are not remembering others who were; we are not preparing to one day become the Body; we should not be looking around for others to be that instead of us. We are the body of Christ.

One way of understanding what this means is that we are really God's body – something all people are – even the whole creation. As far as we can tell, God can only be God through the creation, through the life God gives us all. People who knew Jesus saw God's love and life so fully in Jesus that they claimed him as God's very being, alive in human flesh – in a body like ours. They began to call the gathered community which became the Church the Body of Christ. And that is the Christian claim, that we too are members of this body – the Body of Christ.

We are called to be what Jesus was. We are called to do what Jesus did – bring good news to the poor, release those in captivity, heal blindness, end oppression and keep on proclaiming that the time of God's favor and the time of ushering in God's kingdom is now! When Jesus stood up in his home town and read the Isaiah scroll about what God's anointed one would do, he startled people and angered them too when he told them that the reading was being fulfilled right there, that day. Startling! Just Jesus, the carpenter's son, charged with carrying out God's dream for the world. Startling! Just us, with whatever differences and problems and reservations we bring

along with our many and varied talents and gifts – just us – we are the body of Christ in this place – part of God’s body. Of course, we’re not up to it; of course we hang back and worry and fret and want to play it safe and want others to be the serious Christians in the world.

Jesus got run out of Nazareth for his message. I’m sure St. Paul had times when he almost gave up on the Corinthians. It is enormously hard sometimes to think of ourselves as the body of Christ. It’s easier to leave it as a slogan. But what a gift and a blessing this is that we are the body of Christ anyway! God calls us into friendship with God and welcomes us, all together, to share our gifts and our lives and to love each other and this church and the world enough to stick at it. To keep coming back, to keep doing the work we are given to do. We human beings are part of how God reveals Godself in the world, and as church we strive to show God’s love in how we treat each other and how we reach out to a hungry world.

This is the time and the place. You, beloved, are the body of Christ. We, beloved brothers and sisters, are the body of Christ – already. How can each of us individually live as members of Christ’s body? How can this church claim that identity and live it in faith and hope and love? Amen.