

# *Christ Inhabited in Us*

from the pulpit of  
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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1 Corinthians 12:12-20

<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>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.

<sup>17</sup>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? <sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

Luke 4:14-21

<sup>14</sup>Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup>He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. <sup>16</sup>When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,<sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: <sup>18</sup>“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” <sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Many of you, no doubt, know the old story about the visitor to a Quaker meeting service. Thinking he was attending a regular worship service, he was puzzled that everyone was just sitting there in silence. After waiting patiently for a long time for something to happen, he finally whispered to the person sitting next to him: “When does the service begin?” And the response came, “When we leave.” Whatever we do when we gather as members of the church makes little difference if we do not carry the message of the gospel out into the world with us when we go.

Paul’s message to the Corinthians about the church being the Body of Christ in the world helps us think about what it means both when we gather together, and when we are sent from this place to live our faith wherever we go. When we gather we need each other, Paul says; we need the diverse gifts of every member. The Hunger Committee needs the Choir, and the Choir needs the Youth Ministry Council, and the Youth Ministry Council needs the Deacons, and the Deacons need the members of the Property Committee, and so on. “You are the Body of Christ,” Paul will go on to say, “and individually members of it.” The church needs all of our members, uniquely gifted, and together each of us contributes to the work of the whole.

That is a worthy and important reading of this text. But there is another way to hear and interpret this passage of scripture, and a very important one against the backdrop of our times. For Paul is not only talking about the church gathered, he is also instructing the church as it is sent into the world. Remember, the metaphor of the body was familiar in Paul’s context as a way to understand members of a community having different functions that all work together; it appeared in the works of Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch and Seneca. But Paul takes this common metaphor, an often used descriptor for any corporate gathering – social, government, communal, and he applies it to Christ. In so doing, he goes beyond the understanding that members of a group should treat one another within the group with respect and appreciation. Paul claims this body metaphor is instructive for how the church should treat others

outside the community of the church. Paul enjoins the church to imitate Jesus – who spent his days teaching, serving the marginalized, healing untouchables, and rejecting injustice.

New Testament scholar from Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Matthew Skinner, says – Paul is after something bigger here than – every gift of every member counts - in the church. “This is about Christ’s presence in the world; and how Christ needs us, our bodies, to be inhabited in the world.”<sup>1</sup> This is about more than getting along with one another inside the church; it’s about how together we represent Christ through our witness outside the church. It’s reminiscent of that old saying, often attributed to Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.”<sup>2</sup>

To be this kind of Body of Christ is to echo Jesus’ own inaugural sermon that we have heard today from Luke’s gospel – that he himself was sent to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah: *To bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.* The church, the Body of Christ, is called to imitate that.

I have had a number of conversations recently with people who are wondering about the future of Mainline Christianity in our county. We have read of the church’s declining membership. And we know a lot of that is attributable to small town and rural parishes where church membership has fallen because of the population of those communities has dropped. With more folks living in cities, some of the statistics about the church dwindling is attributable to changing demographic patterns.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Skinner comment at the Moveable Feast preaching seminar, Jan. 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Shannon Craigo-Snell, *Connections: Year C*, Vol. 1, p. 199 ff.

Statistics also show that in more dense populations, like ours, churches that are welcoming and engaged with the community around them in meaningful Christ-like ways are countering the decline. Another trend, however, that merits our attention is how young adults are counting themselves as spiritual but not religiously affiliated. What does that mean for the future of the church?

What we at Bryn Mawr need to pay attention to is how studies have shown that young adults are most attracted to more traditional churches like ours, if there is a willingness of the congregation to engage in service that makes a difference in the world. Which is what Paul had in mind all along. Our gathering together – with a multiplicity of gifts – is primarily for the worship of God, and then to nurture ourselves to do God’s work in the world.

There was a movement a while back of churches seeking to attract people by focusing primarily on stylistic changes – more informal worship, edgier programming, impressive technology. Some of these congregations have been drawing millennials back to worshipping communities in meaningful ways. But studies have shown that branding is not the only thing people are searching for.

Recent research from the Barna Group found that 67 percent of millennials prefer a “classic” church to a “trendy” one, and 77 percent would choose a “sanctuary” over an “auditorium.” Millennials “are not disillusioned with tradition; they are frustrated with slick or shallow expressions of religion,” argues David Kinnaman, who interviewed hundreds for this survey. One respondent said, “I want a service that is not sensational or flashy... I can be entertained anywhere. At church, I do not want to be entertained. I do not want to be the target of anyone’s marketing. I want to be asked to participate in the life of an ancient-future community.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Barna.org

I love that! And I think that's what Paul is asking us to be. To be an ancient-future community. The early church was trying to imitate the life of Jesus by being a loving, authentic, inclusive community – where all spiritual gifts were welcomed. They had a mission to equip people when they left the nurture of worship gatherings to do the work of Christ in the world – empowering the poor and working for justice in a world of injustice. This is why our current church conversations on racism are so critical; like the early church, we have a mission to bring down systems of oppression and free people to be authentically human in every respect.

Author, Rachel Held Evans, left her evangelical roots which she found to be too judgmental, and too often looking for simplistic answers to difficult questions. She already had a following in evangelical circles when she left and joined the Episcopal church. She writes, “I did not like how gay and transgender people were being treated by my evangelical faith community. I had questions about faith and science, biblical interpretation and theology. I felt lonely in my doubts... While no two faith stories are exactly the same,” she goes on, “I’m not the only millennial whose faith could not be saved by lacquering on a hipper veneer. ... You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality. You can be dazzled by a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve. You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God. What finally brought me back to church, after years of running away, wasn't lattes or preachers in jeans; it was baptism, confession, communion, preaching the word, anointing the sick – those strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past two thousand years.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Jarvis, *Connections: Year C*, Vol. 1, p. 200-201, and Rachel Held Evans, *Washington Post*, 2017.

That's what makes the church relevant. It doesn't need to be repackaged or rebranded; it just needs to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community. The church is found, she concludes, when these ritual practices of being loving, authentic and inclusive "are extended not simply to the religious and the privileged, but to the poor, the marginalized, the lonely and the left out."

Friends, after worship today, we are going to elect new church officers – Elders, Deacons and Trustees. My prayer for this church is that these servant leaders will help every single one of us claim our gifts, and lead us together to be the church we are called to be – when we leave worship. One that inhabits Christ – in our own bodies wherever we go –

*To bring good news to the poor,  
release to the captives,  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*

so that together we really are the Body of Christ in the world.

AMEN.