

**Sermon – 1/27/19**  
**“Be the Body of Christ”**  
**1 Corinthians 12:12-31**  
**Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC**  
**John Ryan**

For many churches, January marks an important time for annual meetings in congregations. At these times, we necessarily focus on “the Church” – how things have been going for the last year and what we plan for the next year. But at such meetings, we also often pause to remind ourselves about what the Church is and what it is not.

A usual starting point is to declare that the place where we worship is not the Church. Rather, this building is a structure in which the Church gathers for solace and pardon and strength and renewal and for inspiration to become more fully what God calls us to be – the body of Christ.

In today’s Epistle, Paul affirms that we, the Church, are, in fact, “the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

We know that the pastors, the Session and Deacons are not the Church. Sunday School teachers are not the Church. Our mission committees are not the Church. No one person, no one group, and no one activity can become the Church for us. **The Church is the body of Christ.**

But we often refer to The Church as something to belong to. We talk about joining the Church like we do about joining the Rotary Club or the PTA or the Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts. We pay dues to them, attend meetings when we feel like it, and turn in our membership cards when we grow tired of the organization’s activities or become angry at what it does or the changes it makes. The Church, committed to God, is very different, of course. It is the body of Christ.

The Church is not something to watch on television as interested spectators. It is participatory. We are necessarily partakers and contributors. We are not like the audience at a concert, but we are like members of the choir making the music – God’s music to which we dance in our daily lives, following our Christian values.

We are the body of Christ, and each of us individually is a member of it. But we are not individuals **WITHOUT** the body – only **WITHIN** it. Our faith and tradition create a certain conflict with the rugged and independent-minded individualism that has formed so much of our American culture. We are not Christians alone; we are not separate actors choosing our own views without reference to the faith. Always, we are together – parts of the whole. And our congregations, the Church, are part of the body of Christ.

But what happens when that body fractures? Do we walk away, throw in the towel, take our marbles and go home? Do we seethe in anger and become destructive to the organization that we love? Do we do nothing? None of those options seem like the right answer, yet I know there must be a better way.

It’s seems as though our culture has told us and has even conditioned us that everything is a we or they issue these days.

- You either support Dreamers or you want to build a wall.
- Think there should be privatized health care or universal health care.
- You are red or blue.
- Being purple is no longer allowed.

Our world has become so devise that it is often hard to watch the news. I find avoidance easier than to have or engage in civil conversations with people I know I disagree with because I don’t have the energy to fight. I have let lapse a twenty-year relationship with a family I love because it feels as though I no longer know them and don’t know what to say to them anymore. And we are all Christians, we are all Presbyterians! It’s seems as though we as a society, even as the body of Christ we have lost the ability to agree to disagree.

On a WFAE radio program on Wednesday about the Covington, Kentucky viral video controversy, Julie Zimmerman from *The Atlantic* is quoted as saying "The story is a Rorschach test – tell me how you first reacted, and I can probably tell where you live, who you voted for in 2016, and your general take on a list of other issues – but it shouldn't be. Take away the video and tell me why millions of people care so much about a...group of high-school students protesting legalized abortion and a small circle of American Indians protesting centuries of mistreatment who were briefly locked in a tense standoff. Take away Twitter and Facebook and explain why total strangers care so much about people they don't know in a confrontation they didn't witness. And here is the thing, the news didn't even report the whole story at first. Why are we all so primed for outrage, and what if the thousands of words and countless hours spent on this had been directed toward something consequential?"<sup>i</sup>

**Because we are the body of Christ.**

Last week Claire talked about Eboo Patel, a Muslim American, who is the founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core. In his address at the Montreat College Conference, he told a story of Ruth Messinger, President of American Jewish World Service, and an experience about the holiness of common ground she had in western Oklahoma when she was a government worker there.

Messinger's first professional experience was in Western Oklahoma in the early 1960s. She was a Jewish woman from New York City with a graduate degree working for the government -- lots there for the locals to be suspicious about. The best place to do her job happened to be at churches. So she went. A lot. She went to formal brick churches on Sunday mornings, she went to Bible studies on porches on Wednesday evenings, she went to backyard praise gatherings on Thursdays.

I imagine Ruth did not agree with everything she heard, was probably offended by some of it. I imagine a few of the people looked at her cross-eyed. But Ruth had something a lot more powerful than political and theological disagreement. Ruth had hundreds of children -- abused, neglected, orphaned children. And she needed to find foster families for them. The evangelical ministers in Western Oklahoma considered this God's work. After the sermons and the songs and the altar calls and the amen choruses, they would stand at the pulpits and point at Ruth and say, "This woman has informed me that there are four of God's children in our community who are hurting and need families to take care of them. I need four families to come forth and volunteer to do God's work with her and me and take them in."

"We always got our families, and it never took long," Ruth said.

How many subjects did Ruth Messinger and those Western Oklahoma evangelicals disagree on? Those arguments could have lasted long into the night. But Ruth Messinger chose to extend a hand instead of wag a finger or shake a fist. Hundreds of children in Western Oklahoma grew up in families instead of [group homes] because Ruth Messinger stood on common ground.<sup>ii</sup>

We are the body of Christ. 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 breath, hundreds of different parts work together so that what we experience is a single movement, our minds and bodies working as one unit. Even the greatest engineers struggle to achieve anything like it in mechanical form. That is why the body is one of the most powerful images for the church offered in Scripture.

In baptism, we come to the water as individuals, independent and relatively self-contained. But we come out of that 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. But the body does not work when one part checks out for a few years or leaves; 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.

If we take Paul's words seriously about our place in the body of Christ, it takes all of us, even the ones we vehemently disagree with to be whole. Only then can we truly know what God intends for us, the church.

Will the headlines about Afghanistan or Iraq or what's happening in Washington DC be different next month if you extend your hand a bit more? Probably not. Will cable news anchors hang it up when you commit to finding common ground? I'd be lying if I said yes. But sometimes you do things because they are important to do, because they are holy." What part will you play? **Be the body of Christ.**

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<sup>i</sup> "<https://the1a.org/shows/2019-01-23/believing-what-we-see-the-covington-catholic-video-and-competing-narratives>

<sup>ii</sup> *Delivered at the Colgate University Baccalaureate, 2012*