

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Corinthians 12

"Church"

In our short tour of Christian theology, we have started to look at the work of the Holy Spirit. He brings us to faith in Jesus Christ so that we are reconciled to God, and places us in a community of faith that we call *the Church*. What is the church, exactly? We use the word in many ways: as a building (meet at the church); as an institution (belonging to a church); as a synonym for a worship service (will you be at church on Sunday?). The main New Testament use of the word "church" is as *the people of God*. The basic meaning of the Greek word *ekklesia* is an assembly of people. The Christian Church is the community of people who have faith in Jesus Christ.

What is this community *for*? Among many other things, it is the community in which the Spirit shapes Christians to be more Godly, the place where *sanctification* occurs. The community is also of course a gathering of people to *worship* God, a community where the truth of God is *taught*, a community where people are trained to *serve* God and other people, a community where people learn what it means to bear *witness* to their faith in Christ.

1) *The People of God*

The New Testament uses many metaphors for the people of God: the bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the foundation of the truth; but the most frequent and

compelling is that this community is *the body of Christ*.

That has at least three meanings. One is that the church is a united whole, like an organism, under the direction of its head, Jesus Christ. Second it is a community of people with very diverse gifts and callings, each of which is designed by God to serve the needs of the whole. Thirdly, the church is the presence of Christ in the world today: his hands, his feet, his ears, his eyes, his mouth, so that his ministry in the world can be carried out in the power of his Spirit, who dwells in the community.

The church's diversity was clear from its beginning: on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was "poured out" on young and old, male and female, with the result that people from all over the ancient Middle East heard the word of God in their own languages. That diversity was wonderful - God's promise that Israel would be a "light to the Gentiles" was now coming true - but also problematic, in that so many kinds of people now had to be integrated into a community. Israel was ethnically homogeneous, the church was not. Israel was a nation with a land of their own, the church was not.

Paul spelled out to the Corinthian church how they should understand and use their diversity. "You are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it... the body is

made up of many parts... God has arranged the parts, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be... no part can say to another "I don't need you" ... no part can say "I am not needed"... the parts that seem weaker are indispensable... there should be no division in the body... if one part suffers, every part suffers with it, if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Cor 12). So the individuals who make up a local church, and the churches that make up the global Church; should work together to achieve the purposes of Christ who is their head.

Even the work of the Spirit making individuals more Godly, more sanctified, is *for the sake of the community* – and not only, as we might suppose, to please God! So Paul tells the Ephesians "put on the new self, created to be like God... put off falsehood and tell the truth, for we are all members of one body... steal no longer but work, so that you have something to share with those in need... no unwholesome talk, but speak what is helpful for building others up... be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving as Christ forgave you." (Ephes 4). So even the tensions that exist in a diverse community are the Spirit's tools teaching us reconciliation and Godliness!

So Christians must submit to the nurturing and teaching role of the church, and learn from her. As even the Reformer John Calvin emphasized, "if you will have God as your Father, you must have *the church as your mother.*" "In her womb you are conceived by the Word of God, and there you are to be fed and taught and cared for so that you can grow to maturity." There is no such thing as a purely individual Christian – "Jesus and me" is never the formula. Of course we need individual faith in Christ as our Savior and Lord, but we must "work out our salvation" by the work of the Spirit in the company of

the people of God, in the body of Christ, in the church which is our mother.

2) *The Church Today*

"So what?" you are supposed to ask! How does all this translate into our 21st century church environment? The first thing to say is that *the diversity of the church is greater than ever*; not only is it world-wide and includes people of every tribe and language and people and nation (Rev 4), but in the USA even local churches are more diverse than they have ever been. Consider our little part of the body of Christ that we call the Wading River Congregational Church. How many of you were raised Congregational? Catholic? Episcopalian? Methodist? Lutheran? Presbyterian? Baptist? Pentecostal? Bible-believing Fundamentalist? Almost every one of us has at one time been something else, maybe several "somethings!"

So every one of us has absorbed different ideas of "how to do church," and in a day when the old denominational and ethnic ties mean so much less, many of us now worship in local "community churches" where we feel at home with our neighbors, and we pay little attention to traditions or labels. But that does not mean we have forgotten our roots, or do not have strong preferences on how to "be the church!"

Take for example the responses to our recent survey (for which many thanks - we are learning a lot - please send in more!) Some people think everything about the church is wonderful and they wouldn't change a thing. Some people think there are many things that need changing. Some people would like the Sunday worship services to be earlier, some later, some on Sunday evening, some on Saturday evening, some on a weekday evening. Some think we should abandon the early service. Some think the services are too long, some think the sermons

are too long, some think the prayers are too long. Some want more contemporary music, some think there is too much singing already!

Some people say the sermons speak to their lives, some think they are out-dated, too historical, and in one case "torture"(!) Some people want uplift but don't get it. Some people want relevance but can't find it. Some people think a worship service should never exceed 60 minutes, some think 50 minutes! Some think the church is too conservative, some tell me it's not conservative enough. Some "come for the people," despite their discomfort with other things and that's good!

What can we say to this? Certainly the Deacons and I have much to discuss! "Thank you" to those who have indicated that you work some Sundays, that you are exhausted by Sunday, that you need to with your families on Sunday. Many of these things we had supposed might be true, but you are giving us some firm information to work on.

But let me make a couple of observations. One striking thing is *how precious a day* Sunday now is. That is in some ways a very good thing. It suggests we are all coming to realize that we need a "day of rest" - we are rediscovering the Sabbath principle. But it's also clear that we are trying to cram a lot into Sunday. That means it is becoming as pressured - even if in different ways - as any other day in the week. In particular, we're not sure we can spare time for church - perhaps one hour maximum!

And at that point, perhaps we should stop and ask ourselves "why?" If we can barely spare one hour to be with the people of God, to learn God's truth, to offer God our praise and worship - that is, tell him how much he is *worth* to us - then maybe our Christian faith is in danger of being choked by other things - however worthy!

It's also clear that we should rejoice that God has placed a very diverse group of people here! We have hands and feet, ears and eyes of the body; people with brains and with muscle, people who are good with children and people who can sing, people who can organize events and people who can inspire teenagers, people who can teach and people who can do carpentry. I thank God for every one, and that "he has arranged the parts in the body just as he wanted them to be." We have much to learn from each other. We are one of the most harmonious and happy churches I have ever been part of!

And the frictions that unavoidably exist among redeemed but not yet fully sanctified people are just part of the Spirit training us for maturity. I said a couple of weeks ago that sanctification was "why God has put those irritating people around you, to teach you reconciliation!" Two couples who are close friends turned to one another afterwards, and one said "suddenly everything becomes clear!"

One purpose of any church community is "*learning to get along with people you don't agree with, for the sake of Jesus Christ.*" That's what it means to be given, as Paul says, "a ministry of reconciliation," so that people who are reconciled to God through Jesus can learn (and then model for the world) what it means to be reconciled to other people. That - among many other things that we will talk about in coming weeks - is what "church" is for!

Let us pray...