

It Is Always Spring

1 Corinthians 12.12-31a

January 24, 2010

The world needs all of our power and love and energy, and each of us has something to give. The trick is to find it and use it, to find it and give it away, so there will always be more... Each of us is a seed, a silent promise, and it is always spring.

- Merle Shain

The Reading

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. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot were to 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. ¹⁶And if the ear were to 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts.

It may not seem obvious at first blush, but there is a common thread woven through the scripture passages shared with us this morning. In Psalm 19, the Psalmist speaks of God’s glory,

*James R. “Bo” Crowe
Overland Park Christian Church*

God's presence, being visible in the tapestry of creation - wherever one may turn - as long as one has eyes to see. God's glory is visible as well in Torah, the revealed will of God which we sometimes call law. And in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says that the glory of God, the presence of God, is visible within the church, because at its heart the church is the body of Christ. I would like to explore the visible presence of God and what it means for our lives in our time together this morning. As we begin will you please join me in prayer?

Gracious One, our prayer today is simple; as we come together to pray and praise, to meditate and reflect, and to open our hearts to you, we pray that we will be transformed in your presence. We pray that we will not simply understand your presence, but will stand under its truth. May we live into its truth, that we may give you arms and legs, eyes and ears, to be compassion, to be justice, and to be peace in our world. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

If I were to compile a list of the top ten biblical perspectives that Christians tend to overlook or completely ignore, the passage of Paul read to us just a few moments ago would contain at least three. You know, we're awfully good at mouthing off about our respect and admiration for scripture. We love to talk about the authority of the bible, we take great pride in our belief of God's word, but we fail to recognize the difference between belief about God's word and living its reality.

The philosopher Martin Heidegger expressed well the tendency to ignore the reality of truth. He noted that we are usually satisfied to make intellectual sense of life's great truths – to understand them – when we should strive to stand-under their truth; to be touched by it, to be transformed by it. We Christians are usually satisfied to know *about* God's grace, when we should not rest until we have felt God's grace. We are usually satisfied to know God *as* a God of peace, when we should insist on inviting God's peace into our experience.

We're awfully good at talking *about* truth, but we're not so good at living *into* truth. That's why Paul's image of the church as the body of Christ usually seems so hollow. We take it as *just* a metaphor (always a mistake!); we take it as just a colorful description of the church. When push comes to shove, however, it doesn't really affect the way we *do* church.

Paul, on the other hand, is talking about the vital presence of God in the church; a divine dimension at the heart of who we are and what we are about. Church is not just we-uns gathered together; church is we-uns woven together by the real presence of Christ. Top ten

list, number one. If this is not enough – top ten list, number two – Paul asserts that if the Christ is to have a continued presence and ministry in the world, it will be because we allow God to be present in and through us. Finally, within the body of Christ - top ten list, number three – Paul insists that each and every individual is equal, and equally empowered by God.

This is a whole bunch of truth to stand-under; this is a whole bunch of truth to live into. Can you imagine what would happen if we really began to take these truths seriously? Take, for example, the church as the body of Christ. The church we know most of the time is a well oiled machine; a social institution par excellence. We've got this institution thing down pat; we're good at organizing committees, calling meetings, and making decisions; but how often do we really consider that the church has a divine dimension to it? That the church is not just a gathering of individuals? Rather, it is an interweaving of spirits around the very real presence of God. How would we live our life in community if we really took seriously the truth that there is a divine dimension to who we are; that we are called of God, blessed by God, and challenged with ministry and mission? How would our lives together be different if we really believed that there is a divine dimension to church?

Again, how would our relationship to the world be different if we really believed that Christ's continued presence in the world is through us? Some two thousand years ago, Jesus of Nazareth walked the hills and vales of Galilee and gave us a living example of what it means to be selfless; of what it means to be a servant, of what it means to reach out to others in compassion. Jesus gave us a wonderful example of what it means to embrace each and every one of God's creatures as cherished by God, as marked indelibly with God's image, as loved by God without question or qualification.

There is good reason for this example. God has every intention of extending the mission and ministry of Jesus in our world. If Paul is right, the only way the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth will continue in our world is through the body of Christ. If Christ is to have eyes and ears, hands and feet, to go to points of disaster, to go to points of need, to reach out to individuals and families within a faith community, to bring healing and support and comfort... if the ministry of Jesus the Christ is to continue in our world, it will be through the church realizing and standing under the truth that the church is the body of Christ.

If this is true, we will have to be careful when we pray for God to bless and touch and heal. We will have to be careful when we say, God, please be with the people of Haiti; we will have to be careful because we are the body of Christ, and God wills to be with the people of Haiti through us. Wow; how would our efforts differ if we truly believed that we are the body of Christ?

Finally, Paul asserts that each of the members of the body is blessed, talented, and cherished by God. There are no distinctions, Paul says; there is no hierarchy, there are no gifts that are nobler or better or more worthy of respect. Each member of the body is gifted, and as our worship heading makes so very clear, the trick is to find our gifts and use them for others. Let's be honest. We may half-heartedly believe that everyone is gifted in some way; but we don't for a minute believe that all gifts are equal. We tend to reserve our highest praise for those who lead multiple ministries year after year after year – they're elders and board members and worship leaders and teachers and on and on and on - we cater to those who have deep pockets and prove it on a regular basis; we praise those who speak with eloquence, or teach with skill, or reveal a wealth of knowledge. These are the members whose gifts are truly important!

If Paul is right, however, and I believe he is, the gifts of every member of the body of Christ are equally important. From eloquent preaching or insightful teaching to the loving preparation of communion or cooking a mean pot of chili, all gifts are equally important to the ministry of the church. No one activity is ministry; rather the ministry takes place in the whole of the activities; teaching and praying and feeding and supporting and just plain having fun with each other. So whether your gift is making coffee, presiding over communion, washing dishes at a food kitchen, caring for children, leading a small spiritual formation group, doing laundry for the homeless... whatever your gift or gifts, they all weave together in the whole and become indistinguishable.

You see, church and its ministry is not about tooting one's horn, it's not about standing above and beyond, it's not about gathering the most accolades; it's all about working together in a thousand and one different ways, a thousand and one seemingly insignificant acts of love

and compassion and goodness. When our gifts are woven together into one seamless fabric they become the ministry of Christ reaching out into our world.

We struggle to recognize our own gifts, because we tend to think that a gift of ministry has to be a superlative gift, it has to be something that is unique to me, something that no one else can touch. We look everywhere for such special gifts, and yet the special gift that God has for the church is you; just as you are, only willing to be used. It doesn't have to be a unique calling; it doesn't have to awe and inspire the masses; it doesn't have to be miraculous; it doesn't have to be a supernatural gift. The very natural gift of reaching out to someone in love is a gift of the Spirit. The very natural gift of loving children – caring for them in the nursery, teaching in Christian education or vacation bible school - is a gift of the Spirit. Praying with and for others is a gift of the Spirit. We don't need unique gifts, we simply need to recognize that the gifts we have are unique; however humble they may appear, God can and will use them in Christ's ministry in the world.

If I were to compile a top ten list of biblical perspectives that we tend to ignore, today's passage from First Corinthians would contain at least three. We tend to ignore that divine dimension that weaves our community together and gives it reality; the Spirit that makes of us something other, something more than simply a social organization. We are, rather, the body in which and through which Christ is present in our world. This doesn't make us superior, this doesn't make us unique, this doesn't entitle us to the praise of others; because the Christ whom we embody is the author and owner of the gifts we are granted to use for a while. We don't have to claim these gifts as our own and in so doing negate their usefulness; rather, we have only to find our gifts and share them with others. Each of us is a seed, each of us is a silent promise ...and it is always spring.