

Why do you come to church? I ruminate on that question with some regularity, not only asking it of myself, but also considering how individuals here answer it and wondering why those who have no spiritual home don't come to church. At least part of it must be that they see the church as having no value, or negative value. Of course I disagree, but I respect that point of view and understand why people think that.

The church exists to change lives, to make a positive difference. These two little churches have changed my life; they give me life and growth. I think of Jesus saying, "I came that [you] may have life and have it abundantly." (*John 10:10b*)

Human beings try to have life, abundant life, two ways. One way involves seeking position, wealth, power, achievement, popularity, praise – *external* things. To some extent we need these things, but I wonder if, in our society, we put too much emphasis on them, too much value in them. The other way is *internal* things: personal growth, serving others, connecting to others – the things Jesus offers.

The Church, the body of Christ, offers three basic things:

- 1) a connection and encounter with God, God in our lives;
- 2) belonging, a community where I'm known and accepted and where I serve something bigger than myself; and,
- 3) support to grow as a person, for my character to strengthen.

These three give our lives meaning and purpose.

Church, of course, is not the only place where these things may happen, but it's really the heart and value of Christian community. That's why many people dedicate their lives to building Christian community, and it's why St. Paul put so much of himself into the gathering of Christians at Corinth, that it might be a place of encounter with God and good news, a community focused on human transformation.

Corinth was a major Greek city, cosmopolitan and wealthy, a mixture of many ethnicities, lots of people coming and going, a useful place to set up shop to let people know about Jesus and the gospel. Paul established this gathering of Christians and made extended visits there at least three times, sent assistants there to represent himself to them, received delegations from them, and wrote at least five letters to them, probably more. The two letters we have in our Bible may actually be a combination of several individual letters.

Paul's letters reveal deep communal dysfunction, and, to be honest, some dreadful pastoral problems. The Corinthian Christians were disobedient, ornery, and obstinate; they almost certainly kept Paul up at night, tossing and turning, wondering how to deal with these impossible people, some of whom ridiculed and belittled him. He reacted to them variously: on occasion with fierce, withering words and also with tears, but mostly with tact and care, with love. He addressed controversies about doctrine, worship, discipline, and vision. He dealt with volatile class, gender, and personality tensions.

The Corinthian gathering had conflicting loyalties, three or four factions, and Paul addressed the problem not with directions to each group, but rather with criticism to the whole group. He compared the gathering, the church, to a human body. He argued that, like a body, a community needs diversity and interdependence.

- **Diversity:** the beginning of today's reading explained that God has designed a body to have multiple parts, doing different things, but all belonging to the one body.
- **Interdependence:** then Paul explained that each of a body's parts is indispensable to the body functioning in a healthy, effective, and pleasant way; each contributes to the body and receives from the body.

All of a body's parts are in it together; the fate of each part tied to the fate of the other parts.

Today's epistle reminds us that differences are not a mark of weakness. Any group, or family, or couple, has differences, and these are not a threat, but differences *do* require us to do the hard work of cultivating virtues that help us to live in unity. That is what leads to spiritual maturity, to producing what Paul called the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, gentleness, self-control.

When I read the newspaper these days, and especially if I turn on talk radio or TV talking heads, I don't see many fruits of the Spirit. There's so much scorn and dissension and party spirit, and so little appreciation that God has made everyone important and valuable. Paul said that everyone in a body is indispensable. Do we recognize that we're all in it together?

Think of the groups you are part of: family, church, school, friends, work, neighborhood, nation. It can be very difficult to value everyone in those groups, but as we rise to meet that challenge, we grow spiritually. No one can be a Christian on one's own. Spiritual growth is not a private matter, but has everything to do with relationships, especially the challenges of being with other people, not retreating from, but engaging

even very difficult people, like the Corinthians. Indeed, by engaging difficult people we are really confronting ourselves, our own shortcomings.

In the church, at the very least, Paul asked us to accept each other and value each other. Christians have differences about theology, scripture, mission, worship, abortion, sexuality, guns, wealth, global warming, gender, and many other topics. There's no value in getting defensive and condemning. There's value in *listening* to each other and remembering that we are one, and surprising as it is to us, that we need each other.

Paul wrote that if one of us suffers, we all suffer. If one of us is honored, we're all honored. It's just as if the stomach gets upset, the whole body feels it. If a finger gets broken, the whole body experiences pain and weakens.

In effect, Paul said, "Feel compassion, empathize with those who are suffering. Don't be a wet sock trying to protect yourself from emotional discomfort. Don't be lofty and aloof. That doesn't mean you can *fix* someone else's suffering. That doesn't mean you are *responsible* for someone else's suffering. That *does* mean you are *present* to them in their suffering. And in the same way you are there in difficulty, you rejoice with someone who is rejoicing." That's Paul's message to us.

The life of the body, many members and yet one, is the very model for the Church's life. At the same time, this "body life" mirrors the inner life of God, God who is in God's self a community: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God who is three in one and one in three. Each person of the Trinity retains individuality and identity, but has deep mutuality with the others. There's a mysterious balance between individuality and connection, self-definition and community, unity and diversity. That's what we seek in our lives.

God is love, God's inner life a community of love, and it's what we're entering, what we're becoming. It's our future. Today's epistle ends with Paul urging the Corinthians to seek the best gift, and the best gift is love. All of the next chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, the pre-eminent wedding text, is about love, the love of God seen in Jesus: love is patient and kind, not jealous or boastful... does not insist on its own way; ... rejoices in the right... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, ... never ends. This is the love that gives life, abundant life. And it is ours...together...in the Body. Inseparable. And interdependent.