

23 May 2021

Acts 2:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

A Body to Die for

First Mennonite Church

We all have them. Without them we wouldn't exist. I am, of course, talking about bodies. Paul uses the body as a metaphor to talk about the Church. Few metaphors are as plain yet profound, over-used yet under-valued, as is the metaphor of the body. Yet, it's brilliant because it captures four things about the church.

1. First, it captures who we are, our identity.
2. Second, it captures what is essential for life.
3. Third, it captures its appearance.
4. Fourth, it captures what our task is as members of Christ's body.



*Jesus the Good Shepherd. A 3rd century fresco from the Catacombs of Rome.*

In my sermon today, I want to explore this metaphor of the body and why Christ is so foundational for us.

**First**, the metaphor of the body helps us to see who we are, what our identity is.



The main reason Paul wrote these words was to combat the **viruses of competition and individualism** in the Corinthian congregation that was eagerly trying to do the right thing. This body was striving to become a place of nurture, support, discipline, and accountability. The problem with the body in Corinth was it already infected with strains of these viruses, with its social and spiritual rivalries and divisions. Read 1 Corinthians and you will see that so much of it was devoted to Paul's attempts to inoculate these infections.

Too often we think that rivalries and divisions happen when people in the church no longer care about their faith, have lost their zeal, or are back-sliding. Back-sliding was a term I heard growing up. It was often directed at those who the community thought had relapsed into bad ways or error.

I'd say the opposite is true. Rivalries and divisions most often happen in communities that are deeply committed to renewal and nonconformity. Just think about controversial issues the Mennonite Church has faced. Years ago, it was the mode of baptism, then it was moving from the German language to English. Then it was women in ministry, then divorce and remarriage. Most recently the divisive issue is human sexuality. When do rivalries and divisions happen? Certainly not when people don't care. They happen precisely when people are trying **SO HARD** to get it right that they become susceptible to seeing themselves—and those they agree with—as superior to others. This is the virus of competition: "I'm more faithful than you." Here is the virus of individualism: "because I'm more faithful than you, I can no longer associate with you."

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the metaphor of the "body" to tackle the problem of rivalry, division, and its effects on community. He insists the diversity of the body is not for measuring levels of faithfulness, what is better or worse, or importance in the community. Diversity, rather, reflects the variety of gifts God's Spirit bestows on the community, just as a body requires a huge variety of members—of organs, limbs, muscles, and tissue. While some body parts are more visible, others discreetly covered up, still others never seen at all. Yet, they are all essential, each in their own way, to the functioning of the whole body.

The stress in Paul's use of "body" and "members" falls on two points at once:

- each part of the body is distinct and unique, and
- all parts derive their value in relation to the whole body.

Competition and rivalry, unless it is a matter of "outdoing each other in showing honour" as Paul says in Romans (Romans 12:10), seriously wound and damage the community.

But the body is more than a handy metaphor for negotiating group dynamics, as essential as that is for any congregation or denomination. It is much more a way of becoming conscious of the life-giving bond we have with the One who is our foundation. **This is my second point:** The metaphor of the body captures what is essential for life.

The body of Christ was conceived in peace. Nowhere does this come to more forceful and beautiful expression than in Ephesians 2:11-22. The one "who is our peace" (v. 14) reconciles enemies to each other and to their common Creator (v. 16). Both the decisiveness and the costliness of this are expressed quite ironically with the vocabulary of violence: Christ is said to have "murdered" hostility through his own death (v.16). It's expressed quite poetically in our blue hymnal, #587:

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
such a way as gives us breath;  
such a truth as ends all strife;  
*such a life as killeth death.*

~George Herbert, 1633 (*HWB* 587)

In my sermon series on Ephesians that I'm planning for this summer, I will say more about this. Suffice it to say, there is much more in this passage than the wondrous victory over violence, hatred, and estrangement. If we pay close attention, we see there this astonishing wonder: the birth of the new humanity, a people of God's peace!

For my sermon title I chose, a body to die for! I meant it in the informal way the phrase, "to die for" is used. We sometime say, "She has a figure to die for" or "that chocolate cake is to die for." We say something is great or we'd really wish for something. I'm saying, this body of Christ spoken about in the Bible is "to die for!" It's an incredible body!

The offspring of God's costly and risky peace, conceived within the womb of God's peace, the church as the body of Christ is nothing less than humanity being created anew. "If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation," Paul says in 2 Corinthians (5:17). Today is Pentecost, the day when God's Spirit breathed on to and into a diverse group of people, giving birth to a new body. This body is nothing less than God's creation in and through the Messiah.

In the end the church is not an organization (however much it needs to organize), or a club of the like-minded however much members ought to share the "mind of Christ"). The church, in all its diversity, is concrete evidence that God is graciously at work at making peace, and re-creating humanity. Congregations are cells of the Kingdom, colonies of God's future, glimpses in the flesh of humanity's future, in which bitter enemies have become sisters and brothers of each other, and together a home for God.

**Third, the metaphor of the body makes us ponder appearance, too.** We all have bodies; we all are them. We also know what a beautiful body looks like, even if we don't always agree on what that is, and even if too few of us think our bodies fit that category.

I think God has a real sense of humour, because who in their right mind would fashion a body of members who have never liked each other, have never gotten along, who have even hated each other? That is what it meant to have the body of Christ made up of Jews and Gentiles in Paul's day. And who, but God, would

“grow” this body by adding “members” to it from society’s pile of misfits and rejects? This body is multi-coloured, multi-shaped, and inter-generational. But this body is beautiful beyond words in the eyes of the Creator:

*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. (1 Corinthians 1:27-28)*

Despite this body’s odd appearance its very existence has come at a cost—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Our culture’s idea of a beautiful body is one that is lean and trim. In stark contrast, the body of Christ is HUGE, and wants to keep growing. It embraces folks like you and me, but also other Mennonites, even questionable ones here in SK and around the world, and other Christians here and including the world-wide communion of the church. This body is made up of people we love and those we can’t stand. We might go so far as to say that even the church is only a small part of what the body of the reconciling Christ will ultimately encompass. Ephesians 1:10 reminds us that God is gathering up “all things, in heaven and on earth” in and through Christ. What does “*all things*” mean, other than everything!

Who can possibly grasp “what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge”? (Ephesians 3:18). Again, this is a body to die for.

**Fourth**, the metaphor of body captures **what we do** as members of Christ’s body. We use our five senses as well as our arms, our hands, our legs, and our feet to follow our leader, Jesus. As the body of Christ, we follow the risen Messiah in carrying out his messianic mission of reconciling enemies to each other and to God, healing the sick, confronting the powers, and giving his life for the salvation of the world.

A couple of weeks ago, I noted how Mennonites often thought of the body of Christ as being “without spot or wrinkle”. To keep ourselves clean we must remove ourselves from this old and dirty world.

This isn’t what Jesus did. Of course, Jesus retreated to listen to God, be quiet and pray, but Jesus also got his hands dirty, feet dusty, and brow sweaty by engaging this messy and dirty world. Into the world was where Jesus was sent; this is where he sends us, to engage in the messy complicated work of building the home for God and God’s reconciled enemies. **There is no way we can *be* the body of Christ**

**without *doing* the work of our foundation.** I'm reminded of the unforgettable words of St. Teresa of Avila, a contemporary of the early Anabaptists:



*Christ has no body here on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours, no feet but yours.  
Yours are the eyes which express  
Christ's compassion to the world.  
Yours are the feet with which  
Christ is to go about doing good.  
And yours are the hands with which  
Christ is to bless us now.*

It is not only Paul who has this conviction. The Gospel writers wish to make much the same point in the way they describe the life of Jesus. Every word he speaks, every move he makes—announcing the gracious reign of God, eating with outcasts and sinners, healing the sick and afflicted, even giving his life for his friends and his enemies—is to be imitated by his followers. During the height of his own ministry Jesus sent out his followers on a mission that looked remarkably like his own (Matthew 10; Luke 10). The four Gospel writers agree: what is true of Jesus is to be true of his followers. That is also exactly what Paul means when he informs his congregations: “you are the body of Christ!” So, there is no way to *be* the body of Christ without *doing* what Christ did and continues to do.

But we all know there are ways of being the body **without doing** what Christ does. We see it all the time, in our own congregations. We see it in ourselves! We know that even when bodies are lazy or ill; they're still our bodies. Similarly, there are times when the body of Christ looks like it's spent too much time watching the world rather than engaging it. Can the church be a couch potato?!



Other times the church shows few signs of life, is in the ICU on a respirator, unable to breathe because it doesn't have the oxygen of the Spirit.



At other times, the church has been like a bull in a China shop—throwing its weight around, arrogantly thinking it's being faithful, when, in reality, it's causing destruction and ultimately hurting the body. The Church is in the news these days, too often for the wrong reasons.

Paul's use of the body metaphor is meant to remind the Corinthians of who and what they are, but just as surely what that *should* mean given that identity. Yes, Paul is realistic. These two letters to the Corinthians clearly show that Paul has his eyes open to what is going on. But realism does not mean becoming cynical about the church or losing hope and patience. Realism in light of God's love, grace, and peace, means insisting on the reality of the identity of the church as the body of Christ, and at the same time to look the failing of the body squarely in the face. The new humanity is **already** the new human "in Christ" and, all too often, not yet ready to be a new human. This new human exists in what is still very much an old world—a world that competes with the new creation within each of the members of the body of the Messiah.

We sometimes wonder if the church still has legs, or arms, or feet. Long ago, Ezekiel too wondered whether that valley of dry bones could live. God told this dubious prophet about what God would do. Suddenly, in anticipation of the great Easter to come, these bones came together, bone on bone, muscle on muscle. And then God completed the miracle of new creation by ushering in a Pentecost—putting the breath of life itself into these bodies, "and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude" (37:10).

Paul's metaphor of the body is his prophetic word to us reminding us of the new life we have in Christ. In baptism we have been raised with Christ to newness of life (Romans 6:4), we have eaten of the bread of life (John 6:35), we have drunk the living water (John 4:10), and now, we have been given life together as Christ's body, woven together into a body that builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:16), breathing together the life-giving breath of God, working together at the messianic task of befriending the world with its Creator. Yes, a body to die for!

The metaphor of a body reminds us that the God whom we worship and follow not an idea, not a doctrine, not an ethical standard, but a person – Jesus Christ. The

body is Christ isn't some mystical communion of the saints but is incarnate here and now. Do you really want to see Christ? Just look at Christ's body, the Church.