

Baptized into The Church: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Norwalk Christian Church, January 21, 2016, Epiphany 3, Year C

Often we look back at the first churches we read about in the New Testament in idealistic ways, as examples to us of how we should be followers of Christ in our day and time. And usually, it works. Until you visit Corinth. 1st and 2nd Corinthians are letters the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, a church he established, but after he left, things got a little crazy. If you're looking for an example church, First Christian Church of Corinth is not your model church.

In fact, they'd make a better reality TV show than church. Call it Keeping up with the Corinthians or The Real Housewives of Corinth. This church is a mess!

There's a church member who is sleeping around with his stepmother, while other church members give him a pat on the back. Another member has taken a fellow Christian to court, suing him for a menial matter. You've got Christians sleeping with prostitutes claiming, "I'm a Christian. I'm above the law. I can do whatever I want to do." There are other Christians going to parties for the city idols, eating from the all you can eat buffet served directly from pagan altars.

And that's just what they do during the week. When they get together on Sunday, things are a mess. They are dividing up in different factions in the church, uniting under the banner of their favorite preachers. They are also divided by their economic status, and these divisions are made most apparent when they gather for communion.

See, in those days, communion was more than a pinch of bread and a sip of wine. It was a meal--a real, not symbolic, feast. And when the Corinthians had communion, the rich would show up early to eat, leaving none of the Lord's Supper for the poor who got their late. The rich Christians went away bloated and drunk, popping Maalox tablets as they stumble out of the church building, while the poor left hungry and thirsty.

When Paul writes to them, he has some harsh words. Everything they are doing is out of their own self-interest. In their mind, church exists to meet their needs and authenticate what they already believed to be true.

Paul writes to remind them that this is not church at all. Church is about being united, crossing lines of division, and looking out for the interest of the other, the weak and the least among you.

Reading about First Christian Church in Corinth sort of makes us feel good about ourselves, doesn't it? I've seen some messed up churches, but nothing seems as bad as what the Christians in Corinth have going on.

Yet, still, church can be, at times, a pretty sordid bunch. We have good moments, but we have some bad ones, too. I grew up in church. And I've seen my fair share of church conflicts and less than stellar moments in the life of Christ's followers.

I'll never forget that Sunday evening congregational meeting in my home church where I saw two old men, saints in our church, argue loudly over who had the most integrity.

I've long time worshippers ask visitors to find another seat because they were sitting in their pew. I've heard someone burp in the middle of communion. I've seen Christians butt in line at the potluck lunch.

We Christians can be a messed up bunch. We're far from perfect, and, well, it makes sense when I hear people ask, "Wouldn't Christianity be a lot easier without all the Christians? Can't we just worship God by ourselves? Do we really need to bother with all these people?"

In other words, I'm fine with giving my life to Christ. I've even been baptized, which is my personal statement that I've given my life to Christ. But giving my life to the church...that might be more than I can handle!

The surprising thing, though, about Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth is not all the things they're doing, but that in spite of it all, Paul still calls them "church", and he calls them to live like it.

And when he does, he does it from the baptistery. As we heard read a moment ago, Paul writes, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

For Paul, baptism is more than simply baptism into Christ, and it's not just a personal statement. When you are baptized, you are baptized *into* the body of Christ. And what is the body of Christ? That's Paul's favorite term for us, the church. You are baptized into Christ, and Christ is alive in his church. Even in a church like Corinth.

As much as we would like to have the joy of church, without the pain of church—Paul says it's impossible.

And I admit to you, this morning, this is a bit puzzling to me. I often wonder why God, the creator of the world, could not come up with a better idea for sharing the gospel with the world than the church. Surely there must be a more efficient strategy for sharing God's message of love, than a group of Christians trying to live together in community!

Yet here we are! When God decided to give God's gospel to the world, he chose to do it through the church! But honestly, this shouldn't be that surprising. God is always doing things like this.

When God chose to make a nation, God chose a barren couple over a hundred years old. When God called someone to bring that nation out of captivity, God called a stuttering murderer and refugee named Moses who had all but given up on being faithful to God. When God needed a faithful prophet, God chose a little boy named Samuel. When God chose a king for Israel, God chose a nobody, shepherd boy named David, who knew more about playing the harp and writing songs than he did about ruling a country. When God needed a woman to give birth to God in the flesh, he chose a young, unwed girl named Mary. And as Jesus began his ministry on this earth, he didn't choose the finest scholars, the richest lawyers, the best teachers to be his disciples. He chose stinky fishermen, a dishonest tax collector, a religious revolutionary, and one who would betray him.

In a culture that prizes winners and political and financial success, we would do well to be reminded of our salvation history, and of what Paul tells the Corinthians, that "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong."

I can't explain it to you this morning, why God chose people like us to be Christ's body in our world--but God did. And even when the church messes up, when she doesn't look much like a church anymore--she's still the church.

And if you've been baptized, Paul says, you're apart of the church. Despite our disagreements and divisions, despite our different preferences and opinions and likes and dislikes--all of us--we are all one body of Christ.

Since we are one body, that means everyone of us has a place in this one body. Paul compares church members to the different parts of the human body. Some of us are hands and some of us are feet. Some of us are eyes and ears, and some of us are toes and fingers. Each one of us--everyone of us--has a unique role to fill. No one is dispensable. Everyone is needed.

Whatever your part, whatever your role--it is uniquely yours to fill. And if you are not filling your role, if you're scared of commitment or withdraw, your role remains lacking.

Our life together is no accident. God has put us all together. As Paul says, "In fact, God has arranged the parts in the body, everyone of them, just as God wanted them to be."

Like it are not, we are stuck together--bound together. When one part suffers, we all suffer. When one part of us rejoices, we all rejoice. Together, we are the body of Christ at Norwalk Christian Church. We have a mission in this place, a mission that cannot be fully achieved unless all of us performs our function.

And as we approach the communion table today, the table which reminds us of our unity, ask yourself again, or maybe for the first time, What part to do I have to play in this community?

Is there someone else who I need to show appreciation for? Is there some self-interest that I need to lay down for the good of the body of Christ? What talent and gift do I need to share, that I've been keeping to myself?

Ask yourself whatever question is on your heart, and listen for God to call you to step up and be who God created you to be. Indeed, we are the body of Christ, and individually, we are all members of it. Amen.