

“Back to Basics: Why the Church?”

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

February 7, 2021

“I’m looking for a real purpose...I guess I’d even say something worth living for.” It was exactly a year ago. An abrupt beginning to lunch. We had barely ordered and it was clear that my new friend wanted to dispense with pleasantries and dive right in. A recent graduate of an advanced degree program, an emerging leader with several enviable career paths, a young man who had grown up actively involved in a church. “I don’t know,” he continued, “I have no reason to be unhappy; I just feel like something is missing. Something important. I wonder if my life is having an impact. I guess I find myself rudderless. Got any ideas?” Well—I sure did, and I think you would be proud! I immediately launched into a passionate endorsement of the church, and of our church. I invited my friend to join us for worship, to experience the embrace of this welcoming community of faith, to listen for God’s voice, to pray and study the words of scripture, to allow the witness of others to inspire and encourage him. He smiled politely. He looked down at his plate. “Yeah, I thought you might say that. I’m not sure. I grew up in the church. I loved being there as a kid. But church seems complicated now. So many options. So much baggage. I want my life to matter. Can church do that?” Soon the check arrived. As we walked to our cars that frigid February afternoon, I couldn’t help but feel that I’d missed an opportunity.

I’ve thought of our encounter often since that day, and especially that question. I’ve become convinced that my friend is representative of a larger group than we might expect. Not hostile toward faith, or even toward the church. Simply unsure what it all means. What do I need to know, or do, or say, or give, or believe? And, I think, beyond all those questions, there is this one: can the church help me find purpose...help me find God?

Skeptics are justified. Some have heard messages of exclusion and judgment thinly veiled in pseudo-Christian language. Others have seen acts of outright hatred done in the name of Christ, watched churches preach love while practicing condemnation, seen Christian leaders betray their values for the enticements of power and prestige. All have witnessed the decline of church engagement, often hastened by division and internal strife.

In light of all that, why the church? It’s a consequential question in our time. And, according to Paul’s correspondence with the Corinthian church, the answer is found in the witness of communities like ours. One of the reasons I love the Apostle Paul is because he believed in the church. He believed that this beautiful and broken collection of human beings could be a sign of God’s presence in the world, a divine source of meaning and purpose. So do I. Here’s why: the church, through the power of Christ-centered community and genuine relationships, shaped, molded, and called me. Perhaps this is why the letters of the Apostle Paul are so compelling to me. Paul did not write abstract dissertations on the theoretical meaning of God’s grace or Christian unity. He wrote letters to churches, grounded in the real-world circumstances of actual Christian communities, where there was grief and pain, confusion and doubt, dissension and conflict. Rabbi Edwin Friedman memorably instructed clergy, “If you’re going to preach, for heaven’s sake, make it about life.” Paul wrote and preached about life...especially the life of the church.

The truth about the church, which Paul eloquently described to the Corinthian Christians, is this: We need each other. Paul uses the image of the body to make this crystal clear. We have different

functions, different roles to play, but all are part of the same body. That body belongs to Jesus Christ. Each of us is essential to God's work in the world. All of us rely on the presence and gifts of others. For Paul, life in community is not incidental to Christian faith; it is *how* we live it. It is God's intention for us. Following Jesus is embodied in the honest conversation and concrete practices that take place in the midst of vulnerable, broken, and sacred communities.

In Wendell Berry's luminous novel *Jayber Crow*, the title character is a barber who observes and reflects on the changes that take place in the small fictional town of Port William, Kentucky during his many decades of life there in the 20th Century. In addition to his vocation as a barber, Jayber picks up work as a gravedigger for the community cemetery and as a part-time janitor for the local church. Reflecting on his experience of the church, he writes "What I saw was a community imperfect and irresolute but held together by the frayed and always fraying, incomplete and yet ever-holding bonds of the various sorts of affection. There had maybe never been anybody who had not been loved by somebody, who had been loved by somebody else, and so on and on... It was a community always disappointed in itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a sort of will toward goodwill... I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one another's love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace."

I have always loved the tender honesty of this description, but I'm not sure I fully appreciated its truth until the last twelve months. In that time, I have seen, as never before, both the beauty and the fragility of these bonds that hold us together in the Body of Christ. I have witnessed the stunning light cast by people whose faith compels them to serve their neighbors in need with renewed commitment—giving what we have to meet the needs of others. I have heard testimonies of deepened discipleship and closer connection even through cameras and screens.

I have seen willing sacrifice for the good of another and pure compassion that took my breath away. And, I have been dismayed by the depth of division among us and by the responses to those divisions. I have been saddened by decisions to withdraw or withhold rather than engage and lean into struggles. I've been aware of the disappointments many have experienced and the frayed and always fraying bonds of affection that Jayber describes. As one friend and colleague put it earlier this week, it has been a hard year to church. *Can I get a virtual amen?* We have surely seen the beauty and the fragility of Christ's Body; the divine and the human always wrestling within us.

And so, I think it is a good time for us to reflect on what church means, and what the church means to us. To the extent that the crises of the last twelve months have offered clarity in that quest, I say may we accept that clarity as a gift. If this time has troubled the waters for us, that too might be a gift of God's Spirit, if we can receive it.

I do believe that one myth that must be discarded is that the Church exists to preserve an ancient institution or satisfy the needs of those who belong to it—to make us feel comfortable or secure in our standing before God. Paul reminds us that, in Christ's body, it is the weak who are indispensable. Paul's image is not one of static stability but of dynamic adaptation. The Body of Christ is a body in motion, not a body at rest. The purpose of the church is not purely to please us, but to make us more like Christ, whose Body was broken that we might be made whole.

I love Thursday afternoons because I have the joy of walking downstairs and picking our son Ben up from preschool here at Second. Last Thursday we were so busy chatting about the indoor snowball fight (these balls were cotton), that I didn't realize we'd forgotten Ben's bag. For a moment he seemed concerned it might be gone for good, but then he patted my hand and said, "Don't worry, Dad. There's no bad guys here." Then he looked around and said, "Right, Church?" A vision of the church through the eyes of a three-year-old. No bad guys. One body. Right, church?

What is the church? By the grace of God, it is a community of souls who belong to one another, who are sent together into the world to share the Gospel in word and deed. Good people who want to do better—willing to be shaped and molded by a Gospel vision that always exceeds our grasp and asks more of us. The church does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. And please hear this—the world around us is crying out for us to be the church. To give witness to a deeper truth than bank statements or bottom-lines. To testify to a unity that is not rooted in ideological uniformity but in a common call to speak the truth and live God’s love. To show the power of living for a greater purpose than fleeting happiness or personal comfort. To demonstrate the true satisfaction of a life lived for others and not for self.

For me, the church is best embodied by the great tradition of the potluck supper (here in Indiana it’s a pitch-in, I think?) or, as we used to say in rural North Carolina, dinner on the grounds. We all freely bring what we have. We all share with one another. If we’re honest, we like some dishes better than others. I tend to avoid the sliced tomatoes. And there is always more than enough...enough to lengthen the table, open the doors wider, invite others to join the feast.

In this morning’s text, Paul contends that there is one thing that no Christian is permitted to say to another believer: I have no need of you. It’s not that we shouldn’t say it or that it isn’t nice to say it. To say to another member of Christ’s body, “I do not need you” is impossible for a follower of Jesus Christ. Just as impossible as one part of the human body saying to another, “I don’t need you.” Think of the difference it would make if we all took those words of Scripture to heart.

In the fall of 2019, I found myself in a small Methodist Church not too far from here. As I walked through the building, I thought to myself, “This place is pitiful.” The paint on the walls was cracked and peeling, the carpet looked old and worn. I ran into the pastor. He explained that the size of the

congregation has dwindled over the past couple of decades, now only a few people remain. There is no choir, and the organist only comes twice a month to play during the services. “What keeps a church like this going?” I asked, meaning it practically. He looked at me for a moment, then pointed to a greeting card tacked to the bulletin board in front of us:

“I cannot begin to thank the members of this congregation for all of the love and support over the past months. When Charles got sick, you all were there with food and cards and flowers and laughter that I needed so badly. As things turned worse, you never wavered. I don’t know what I would do without this church. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for showing me the love of Christ.” The pastor smiled at me. No further words were needed.

Why the church? Because together we are the Body of Christ. Because God calls us to community. Because we need each other to be what God calls us to be. Because the world needs our witness, and that witness is far stronger when its members are together. Because the next generation needs a voice of compassionate faith and purpose. Because we are sharpened by the voice and perspective of others.

Why the church? Because none of us can do it alone. Thanks be to God, we don’t have to try. Amen.