
The Body of Christ is A Circus

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Epiphany 3 – Year C

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good 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.... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 12, 27)

Have you ever wondered what people really mean when they say they've been to church?

I've wondered it. Last week someone told me they had been to church on Sunday. But, I was there, worshipping and praying and looking out into the pews, and I didn't see them. It turns out they meant they had been to a particular Sunday School class. Another person said they had been to church, but they meant they had visited the Book Store. Other people served as Sunday School teachers, or ushers, or green apron volunteers, and they never stepped into the actual nave, the Cathedral space for worship. Yet, each of them said afterwards, "I was at church this past Sunday."

And, during the week, people visit other places here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. They go the Farmers Market, or to the Preschool, or to the Counseling Center; and afterwards they say, "I've been to church!" Or they attend a class or a program here. Or they walk the labyrinth. Or they just sit outside. And they say, "I've been to church."

That's why the old statistic "Average Sunday Attendance," means less and less to me. Cynical sociologists declare that the church is dying because the number of people attending church services on Sunday mornings seems to be down. (Hey! Thanks to all of you who came to Church this morning!) Well, I certainly believe in the vigor and life and Sunday prayer inside the Cathedral! But church, and church participation, and church commitment is much, much larger than Sunday attendance.

Last week, we heard Saint Paul say, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

This week, we heard him say, "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.... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27).

And, in between last Sunday and today, this church, the Cathedral of St. Philip, this beautiful part of the Body of Christ, hosted the magnificent Cathedral Antiques Show. Once again, thanks to hundreds of volunteers and thousands of prayers, the beauty of the Antiques Show was transformed into mission for the local community. Our efforts and work are turned into financial benefit for one local beneficiary each year; this year it is a fine organization called Wilderness Works.

People sometimes ask me what the Cathedral Antiques Show has to do with church. I offer two words: Beauty and Service. God's church always values beauty and service, and the Antiques Show represents both.

But people actually ask me the same question about all sorts of things that go on here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. What does a book store have to do with church? Why should we be selling things, like a marketplace? Or, what does a farmers market have to do with church? Is all this, “church?”

Ah, such foolish questions! Such foolish questions remind me of the wisdom of one of my favorite philosophers, known simply as “Doctor Lao.” What? You have never heard of Dr. Lao? Let me tell you about him today. In 1935, Dr. Lao first appeared in a little book by Charles Finney titled *The Circus of Dr. Lao*. But many of us really got to know Dr. Lao when a movie was produced in 1964, which starred the actor Tony Randall as Dr. Lao.

Tony Randall played seven different roles in that movie. Thus, the title of the movie was *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*. The story goes like this. One day, a mysterious Chinese man rides a donkey into a small town in the early American West, advertising a circus. The man is carrying almost nothing with him, except a small fish in a small bowl of water. But his delightful mystery produces a huge circus tent with all sorts of rooms and characters. In the movie, each character offers some piece of soul-changing truth to the various residents of the small western town. The seven characters that Tony Randall plays, that is, that Dr. Lao plays, are: Apollonius, the blind prophet; Pan, the seductive half-goat, half-man; Medusa, the snake-haired woman; the Abominable Snowman; Merlin the Magician; and even a sly old serpent.

(If you get nothing else out of this sermon, let it be a recommendation for this move!) It is truly a strange and fascinating circus. Dr. Lao sings a little ditty that goes like this:

*This is the circus of Dr. Lao.
We show you things that you don't know.
...Oh, we've spared no pains and we've spared no dough;
And we've dug at the secrets of long ago;
...And youth may come and age may go;
But no more circuses like this show!*

The circus of Dr. Lao actually becomes a psychological mirror of truth and wisdom, exploring the subconscious of each of the townspeople and truly transforming them. A young boy of the town, Mike, takes a curious liking to Dr. Lao. At one point he asks Dr. Lao why he is so secretive. “Ah, Mike,” says Dr. Lao. “I am not secretive. I am mysterious, but not secretive!”

But enough of movie descriptions! What does the Circus of Dr. Lao have to do with church, either?

Well, just as the Church, as Saint Paul so eloquently describes, is one body with many members, so is the Church also a circus, with many various characters and acts and pieces of wisdom. The Body of Christ is a circus. On one day, a person is praying at church. But on another day, or even week, that person is making sandwiches in the kitchen for the homeless, and never enters the worship service. On another day, a person is simply picking up their child from choir practice or an after-school activity. On another day, a person is supporting local farmers by visiting the Cathedral Farmers Market. Every one of those persons has been to church.

What holds all these activities together? Well, we claim, for sure, that Jesus Christ holds these activities together. Jesus Christ is the Wisdom, the Deep Wisdom, that underlies each of these activities and services. He's not secretive, but he is mysterious!

Here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, there is a set of values that also identifies us. These values are our DNA! You recall, of course, that every living body is made up of cells that share the same DNA. Every living organism has different cells in it, which do different things, but which share a common DNA in their molecular structure.

So it is with our living body, the Church, here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. All our various activities and services and programs, and people, share a set of DNA values. I point out these values as: Grace, Excellence, Hospitality. Here at the Cathedral of St. Philip, we serve Jesus Christ with grace, with excellence, with hospitality.

At our best, we serve grace and excellence and hospitality at the Cathedral Antiques Show. At our best, we serve the homeless and the poor with the grace and hospitality of Jesus Christ. At our best, our programs and classes shine forth with grace and excellence and hospitality. It's in our DNA, the DNA of the body of Christ which we know as the Cathedral of St.

Philip.

But it's really a circus. It's really a deep and wide, and mysterious and sometimes mystifying, circus. A soul-changing circus, like the circus of Dr. Lao.

We see so many various things at the circus: Clowns, acrobats, animals, musicians, dancers, tightrope walkers, magicians, jugglers, unicycle riders, elephants, tigers, the most beautiful people in the world, and the most ugly people in the world. We all see different things. But afterwards, we all say the same thing, "We've been to the circus."

And we see so many various things at church! Clowns, acrobats, animals, musicians, dancers, tightrope walkers, magicians, jugglers, unicycle riders, elephants, tigers, the most beautiful people in the world, and the most ugly people in the world. We all see different things. But afterwards, we all say the same thing, "We've been to church."

It's a delightful circle we visit when we go to church. That's how the word "circus" developed, from the word for "circle," or "ring." Tertullian, the early Christian writer claimed that first circus games were staged by the goddess Circe, in honor of her father, Helios, the Sun God.

Yes, Saint Paul, the church is a body, a living body, with different members sharing the same Spirit, the same DNA, the same values. But, surely, the church (the kirk!), is a circus, too, a seven-ring circus, with rings and circles and helixes, and double helixes all wound up with each other and climbing a spiral ladder, climbing a stairway to heaven!

AMEN.