
'Love's Body' The Church

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
The Last Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 29, Year A

In the name of God: "Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend" Amen

Jesus has been made ruler over all things for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:23 paraphrase)

Back in the 1950s, the decade when I was born, one of my mentors successfully founded a community that has since become worldwide. When I met him 30 years later in the 1980s, Harvey Jackins (1916-1999) was at the top of his game as a communicator and organizer. One of my favorite stories he used to tell was about how he persuaded people to follow his lead, and eventually to become leaders themselves. In particular he described a strategy he devised to motivate people who lacked confidence but had leadership potential. It became a routine speech that he gave to give them a boost. It went like this: 'You have my permission to take anything you learn from me and say it was your idea.'

Take anything you learn from me and tell people that it is based on your own thinking, insights and intelligence. Wherever you go feel free to present yourself as the savvy and effective leader who created this body of work.

Just don't call it what I call it, so there will be no confusion. Make up your own name for it, express things in your own way, trust your own thinking. From now on it's all yours! I give you my permission.

Over the following months, he said, some of these growing leaders would come up to him with new energy. They were so proud and pleased with themselves. Now they were eager to share their increased confidence and enthusiasm. But sooner or later—he joked with a grin—there would come a day when someone would say: "What do you mean, you give me *permission*? Who are you to give me permission!"

Well, something like that kind of reaction occurs to me as I hear today's gospel reading. Who is this Jesus in today's gospel reading, that he can so boldly say the kind of things he says in that parable? Now this is the last parable that we read at the end of this long season of Pentecost. We're at the end of this church year, just as we begin Advent yet again next Sunday. And it's with this final parable that we observe the reign of Christ as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Traditionally today is called "Christ the King" Sunday. But what a strange king this is! Listen again to how Jesus describes this kingship. He is a king who identifies as hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned. "I was hungry," he says to those who reject his teaching.

. . . hungry and you gave me no food . . . thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink . . . a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you gave me no clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.

And when people are dumbfounded and say, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" he answers:

Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these [who are members of my family], you did not do it to me.' (Matt. 25:42-43, 45)

Who is this—we might ask, that our treatment of one of his followers is equivalent to our treatment of *him*! What is so special about that relationship, that everything we do to one of them has also got to be about *him*? What

kind of self-related focus is that, that makes for this kind of equivalence between his followers and him?

As I've been pondering that question, I hear something similar in other traditions. Take for example the moral tradition of the Golden Rule.

Do to others what you would want them to do to you.

In that ethic there's a similar kind of identification or equivalence between oneself and others; like what we hear in today's parable: what happens to others, matters to oneself.

In another tradition, a form of eastern mysticism, there's an even stronger statement of identity between oneself and others. It says:

There's really only one of us. (Feng Shui?)

Similarly, there's the answer that a guru from India gave when he was asked, "How shall we treat others?" He answered:

There are no others."

(Ramana Maharshi, as quoted by Scott Robinson in *Forward Day-by-Day devotional archives for today*, Sunday, November 26, 2023; searchable online at: https://prayer.forwardmovement.org/forward_day_by_day.php)

And even more extreme is that Hindu philosophy that led the Mahatma Gandhi to create a nonviolent movement of civil disobedience. Listen to the Acaranga sutra from India that says:

To do harm to others is to do harm to oneself.
You are the one whom you intend to kill.
You are the one whom you intend to dominate.

We corrupt ourselves as soon as we intend to corrupt others.
We kill ourselves as soon as we intend to kill others.

But in today's gospel, Jesus' identification with others is more particular; more specific. "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40) Here his disciples and his church are favored with his special concern; even the least of them.

That special consideration for the church is echoed in our epistle reading today. At the very end of the passage in Ephesians, referring to the kingship of Christ, we hear that 'God has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things.' And what immediately follows includes *us*: 'God made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.' (Ephesians 1:22-23)

Now the verses before that read like my mentor exhorting his followers to become leaders like himself. In a similar way, we too are exhorted to be bold disciples when we hear this prayer in the epistle:

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . may give *you* a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know . . . what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for *us* who believe . . . (Ephesians 1:17-19; emphasis mine)

So, *great empowerment* is the second theme that is on offer here today. On offer to us, alongside the first theme of acknowledging the kingship of Christ, is the power to be "his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Ephesians 1:23)

Now here I confess—as someone who has heard and read that verse for many years—I confess that I can hardly fathom what it means to say that we the church are the 'embodied fullness of him who fills all in all.' Say *what?* What does it mean to say that we are *the full embodiment of him 'who fills all in all?'*

Of course, there's a clue for answering that question in the body language that we hear in our gospel reading today. It's the body's language of hunger, and thirst, and being a stranger, and being naked, and being sick, and being imprisoned. Hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick, and imprisoned: those are the key features by which this exalted King makes himself equivalent to us. Those are the terms of solidarity by which the King acts in the world.

Pressing this issue further: What does it mean for us to be *likewise* so identified; so identified with one another

in our bodily hungers, thirsts, estrangements, nakedness, sicknesses and imprisonments—so identified that whatever happens to the least of us' also happens to the rest of us? That's an incredible symbiosis—isn't it?—an awesome solidarity; an amazing kind of commonality.

Here recall a related passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that says:

Let love continue, by not neglecting to show hospitality to strangers—for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

(Let love continue) by remembering those who are in prison, as though in prison with them;

(Let love continue) by remembering those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body.
(Hebrews 13:1-3; paraphrased)

Yes, 'since we are also in the body, let's continue.' Let's continue to be Christ's embodied love active in the world today. Not only in word, but also in deed, let us continue to be 'Love's body,' incarnate love struggling across the centuries to bring *divine* love to civilization after civilization after civilization. We have done this from barbaric timescapes back then, to barbaric timescapes today; bearing witness to alternatives ways to be in the world again and again.

(I borrow that phrase from the iconic title of Norman O. Brown's 1966 book, *Love's Body*. It's a 'stand out' title in American literature, where the author wrote: "What is always silently speaking is the body.")

Brown's book is admittedly about erotic love; about "the role of erotic love in human history" and "the struggle between eroticism and civilization"—Wikipedia. But what if we apply that idea of being 'love's body' to our spiritual struggle between the church and civilization? What about our collective Christian struggle across the millennia to be, authentically and faithfully, 'the body of Christ' in the world for every generation? That's the focus here.)

Now admittedly, while we have been scaling the heights of heaven, 'we have also been falling on our faces.' That's the way a journalist recently described the effort to sustain democratic governance and the rule of law here in these United States. 'We fall on our faces because we are jumping so high.'

(Anand Giridharadas and Ruth Ben-Ghiat at www.msnbc.com/morning-joe/watch/giridharadas-the-past-few-years-were-a-revolt-against-the-future-99793477863)

Yes: precisely because we aspire to goals that are lofty and awesome, we inevitably fall short. We necessarily find ourselves having to make amends and correct mistakes; having to beg forgiveness and repent again and again. But as our Eastern Orthodox tradition puts it, we bear a 'joyful sorrow.' We sorrow for all the challenges that we suffer in following Christ. But we also experience joy as we find ourselves actually becoming more and more like Jesus in our relationships and in the world; becoming more able, in the words of our mission statement in the Diocese of Atlanta, to "love like Jesus."

Yes, often enough, we find ourselves able to experience Christ-like love: Christ-like love extended toward us, and Christ-like love coming from ourselves to others. And that's why we keep coming back to church, to soak in this love that more and more becomes real throughout our lives.

Yet it still remains true, as St. Paul put it in his first letter to the Corinthians:

[That] we have this treasure in clay jars (or earthen vessels), so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

It remains true, as he wrote:

[That] we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

And it remains true, as he concluded:

[That we are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (1 Corinthians 4:7-10)

Yes, the resurrection life of Jesus also comes through even as we are targeted like Jesus himself on the cross. But just as he endured and overcame the enmity and animosity of human beings, so we respond with his way of love that challenges worldly powers even as we also make common cause with empire.

And so, as 'Love's Body' we turn again to our upcoming season of Advent. We begin again another church year by celebrating the coming of Christ in the body of a child on that first Christmas morning. And we will hear again, in Handel's Messiah, that great prophecy from Isaiah:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:5)

So also on *this* Sunday, may we rededicate ourselves as Love's body to the one we also extol as, "Christ the King!" Amen.