

Luke 4:14-21 ~ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Now You are The Body of Christ

January 23, 2022 ~ 3rd Sunday after Epiphany ~ Reception of New Members

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Introduction

On this third Sunday after Epiphany, we are still in the scriptural land of firsts for Jesus. A week ago, we heard about Jesus' first sign in the Gospel of John, at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, where Jesus revealed his glory by turning water into mega amounts of wine. Today, we just heard Bob read Jesus' first words spoken to humans, according to Luke, since he became an adult. He spoke these words in Nazareth in the synagogue on the Sabbath, reading from the scroll of Isaiah, and then delivered a one sentence sermon: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* Perhaps I should follow the model of Jesus with a one sentence sermon after the second scripture reading... unlikely.

The Apostle Paul wasn't known for one sentence sermons either. For this we can be truly thankful. Paul's gritty letters deal with how ordinary people living hard scrabble lives were trying to be church together for the first time. Trying to actually live into Jesus' mandate articulated in words of the prophet Isaiah. *Bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to free the oppressed:* that's what we're supposed to do? They were having trouble with doing this back then and honestly, so are we. What does that really look like right here and now? So much brokenness all around us and within us: and so little empathy. So many big opinions hardening down and so little perspective opening up.

In our Second Scripture lesson we pick up right where we left off last Sunday, in the middle of Paul's rant to the church in Corinth. He was ticked off because they were starting to cut off the circulation of the Holy Spirit with their judging and bickering. Their toxic energy was gaining purchase on the matter of, "Who's in and who's out?" And "who's better and who is a loser? As I read this lesson, listen between the lines to whom Paul was likely addressing: some were feeling like they don't belong, rejected. Others feeling unneeded, unappreciated, "less than." And, of course, others were asserting their superiority, their sense of just how much "better than" they surely were.

Paul offers a metaphor to help them and us to see how God has created us to relate to one another, in order to bring about Jesus' seemingly impossible Luke 4 mandate. Paul helps us see, hear, taste, touch and smell how to live into this radical vision together by being this organic, living body that we call "church."

Sermon

It was 1978. The place was Camp David. Then President Jimmy Carter had brought Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Camp David for peace talks in order to end thirty years of war. They had been at it for thirteen days and Carter decided that it was over because Prime Minister Begin was so adamant about not removing his Israeli settlements from Egyptian territory.

Before leaving, Prime Minister Begin had requested signed photographs with the president for each of his eight grandchildren. Carter had decided that instead of just saying "Best Wishes, Jimmy Carter," he had his secretary obtain the names of each of the eight children and then write "with love and best wishes to," and put the name of each grandchild on each of the eight photos.

As Carter recalled in an interview later, "He was quite angry with me at the time. He just said, 'Thank you Mr. President.' But he called out the name of his first grandchild, and then he called out the name of his second grandchild and he had tears running down his cheeks and so did I. Then he said in effect, 'Why don't we try one more time, and so we tried one more time and we were successful.'" Indeed, the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty was signed in Washington in March 1979. Relations between the two countries improved afterward, with trade agreements and airline flights. Egypt also started to supply Israel with crude oil.¹

And so, the course of history, international relations turned, when two men from different countries and opposing perspectives were lifted from the narrow trench of adversarial positions, and into the broader ocean of their shared humanity. Thank God for grandchildren! This story is a wonderful reminder and illustration that all of us are *more than* whatever roles and rankings we attach to others and to ourselves. Jesus came to show us this liberating, yet challenging, and sometimes uncomfortable, truth.

I began with this true story today because you may be feeling at the end of your rope about now. At an impasse or dead end of one kind or another. You are looking ahead and seeing no resolution in sight. Kind of like the way they felt after 30 years of war and 13 days of fruitless talk at Camp David. You may be at your wits end with this pandemic that refuses to be done with us. Or about the recent spike in prices and the real cost of inflation. Or maybe you've been told "it's a supply chain problem" one too many times. Who isn't fed up with gridlock in our congress? Dissension seems to be the *only* key playing there. Dissension within and between political parties. Or you may be struggling in a relationship with a loved one that refuses to resolve or get better. Is there a way forward? How does God make a "way out of our no way"?

I can put it in two words: **radical empathy**. Not just “empathy” which Isabel Wilkerson explains in her book titled, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontent*, where she writes: *“Empathy is commonly viewed as putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and imagining how you would feel. That could be seen as a start, but that is little more than role-paying, and it is not enough in the ruptured world we live in. Radical empathy, on the other hand, means putting in the work to educate oneself and to listen with a humble heart to understand another’s experience from their perspective, not as we imagine we would feel.*

That’s where the church and being the Body of Christ comes in the picture: A place, a community, an opportunity to put in the work and practice “radical empathy.”

She goes on to teach us: *Radical empathy is not about you and what you think you would do in a situation you have never been in and perhaps never will. It is the kindred connection from a place of deep knowing that opens your spirit to the pain of another as they perceive it.”* And one more point important for us in this room: Radical empathy is more than tolerance. She writes, *“The price of privilege is the moral duty to act when one sees another person treated unfairly... In our era it is not enough to be tolerant. You tolerate mosquitoes in the summer, a rattle in an engine, the gray slush that collects at the crosswalk in winter. You tolerate what you would rather not have to deal with and wish would go away. It is no honor to be tolerated. Every spiritual tradition says love your neighbor as yourself, not tolerate them.”*ⁱⁱ

“Now you are the body of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 12:27) The Body of Christ commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves. We know that. Did you know that Paul choosing the human body metaphor in this letter was not original—it had appeared already in the works of Aristotle, Plato, Plutarch, and Seneca. What was new and radical was how Paul took an established philosophical metaphor and transformed it by naming the body as the Body of Christ. And calling us, the church, as the Body of Christ, to imitate, to do what Christ did: to identify with the marginalized and to reject injustice at every turn. To remember that Christ’s body was rejected, despised, abused. Christ experienced suffering and marginalization in his body, choosing to feel the pain of all creation: all creatures great and small.

Jesus came to teach us and show us what “radical empathy” looks like. Jesus came to teach us and show us why we must live otherwise. And he called us to become church together in order to learn how to live otherwise. Today, here at FPC, we have the gift of receiving three new members into our body. Three women who have said “yes” to joining us in this work. Earlier this week, as is our custom, they met with our Session to be voted officially into the Body. In that meeting, each elder shares one thing that they

are grateful for about our FPC Body. One elder expressed appreciation for how FPC is a place where we are the same on Sunday as we are the rest of the week. This is a place where we do our best to live into Christ's call to love, to include, to lift up all our neighbors as ourselves. A place, I would say, where we learn and do our best to practice "radical empathy."

We know that the problems the church in Corinth in the first century, have continued through to the twenty-first century. Throughout the history of our denomination and other churches as well: relational dysfunction has split it again and again. In the last half century, we have seen the growth of the "Nones" and "Dones." Research polls tell this truth: Millennials, in particular, have run for the exits and gone *outside* the church looking for Christ's body in the world. Those of us within the church have tried a number of ways of reinventing ourselves to bring them back. We have lost a lot of sleep asking ourselves: why are they leaving, and what are they looking for.

In an interview with the Washington Post back in 2015, millennial Rachel Held Evans (spiritual writer and author of the book, *Searching for Sunday*) spoke of both the reasons for her departure from church and the journey that led her back to it. For Rachel, it was the treatment of LGBTQ persons in the churches she knew, the lack of help in how to relate her faith creatively and affirmatively to science, her questions about scripture and Christian belief that went unanswered; and the lack of room for doubt, that sent her searching. "What finally brought me back, after years of running away, wasn't lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments. Baptism, confession, communion, preaching the Word, anointing the sick—you know the strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past 2,000 year. The sacraments are what make the church relevant, no matter the culture of the era. They don't need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and *inclusive* community."ⁱⁱⁱ

May we be that, and more, by the grace of God, dear Body of Christ, FPC.

ⁱ https://www.cnbc.com/2014/10/02/how-photographs-saved-the-israel-egypt-peace-talks.html?__source=sharebar|twitter&par=sharebar

ⁱⁱ Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, (Random House: New York, NR, 2020), pp.385-387.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rachel Held Evans, Washington Post, April 30, 2015, <http://wpo.st/1mbh2>.