

**Belonging with Purpose by Rev. Eric Moeller**

Two weeks ago there was a little bit of weather, a few snow flurries you might say, and we ended up doing one service, rather than three, meaning many of you weren't able to be here and didn't hear the sermon I preached then. If you did hear it, I'm sorry, but a little recap might be useful today as we approach this week's texts.

The blizzard text was the story of Jesus' baptism. That story depicted Jesus getting in the river, starting a new journey, with everyone else, and joining a community of people dedicated to living in the world according to the values of the new age; God's reign. Following his baptism, while he is praying, the Holy Spirit falls upon Jesus and a voice calls from heaven claiming him as God's Son, the beloved. Similarly, our baptisms are the beginning of a new journey with a new identity and a new way of being in the world as part of a new community dedicated to that way of being and moving in the world. This week's texts pick up where that text left off. You see, as one commentator states, "We are given the gift of belonging at baptism, but we are also signing up for the responsibility of functioning as part of the Body of Christ."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, by the Spirit, each of us is given a place and purpose within the Body of Christ that we may play our role in God's liberating and life-giving mission.

As we heard in Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Through our baptisms we belong to the Body of Christ. This is our new identity and community, and, as Paul makes clear, in this body the ways that we and the world would divide us, socially, economically, and otherwise, cease to be. What this community, the body, the church, consists of, then, is people who are free, or maybe required even, to truly be themselves; to be fully, authentically who God is creating them to be, because otherwise something is missing; a purpose or function of the body is not being fulfilled. On a similar note each member is to be embraced and integrated into the body in their authenticity.

In this passage, Paul describes how both a rejection of the self and rejection by other members of the body are, plainly speaking, wrong, and are harmful to members and to the body itself. He says, "If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,' that wouldn't make it any less a part of the body." According to Paul, at times a member of the body may look at itself and look at the other members and feel as if they do not belong because they, just by being who they are created to be, are different from other members. This self-perception of un-belonging is revealed by Paul to be entirely false. The member, whether they are able to see it or not, absolutely belongs to the body. It is a part of the body with its own purpose that can only be fulfilled by it being its authentic self. Its difference from the other members is a necessity for the body to function, and nothing can change that. Here in this ancient letter is something that each of us should hold on to. It is likely that there will be times when we may feel like we don't belong to the Body of Christ, or that by our difference we are somehow inferior or inadequate. Remember this: that our own self-doubt will never make us any less a part of the Body. We are a part of the Body of Christ; we belong just as we are, and no one can change that.

While our own doubts may create a self-perception of un-belonging, other members might cause great harm by telling other members they do not belong and are unnecessary to the body. A member might look upon another member who is living authentically as who God is creating them to be, and reject that member because of their difference. The harm this kind of behavior inflicts cannot be overstated. For instance, the suicide rate for LGBT youth is astronomical as

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<sup>1</sup> Raewynne Whiteley, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration (Third Sunday After Epiphany)*, ed. David L. Bartlett; Barbara Brown Taylor. (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 9328.

these kids are told by Christian loved ones they are unnecessary. Many are homeless for similar reasons. On another note, people of my generation have run away from the church because of such judgmental behavior, and because authenticity is central to our desires for community. We, as most people truly do I think, simply want to be a part of a community where we can show up being fully who we are, looking as we do, loving as we do, and be embraced and appreciated in our fullness while embracing others in their authenticity and working together for a common good. That's the kind of community I want to be a part of, and, based on this text, that is the kind of community Paul envisions the church to be. He says, again quite plainly, that one member cannot tell another member they have no need of them, but, on the contrary, those members who seem weaker, those who are the targets of judgment and rejection, are in fact indispensable. They belong to the body, for the body would be lacking without them. They absolutely are necessary, and no one can say otherwise. Hear this: you, your authentic self is absolutely necessary to this community and to the Body of Christ, and no one can say otherwise.

Paul, continues, however, to say that not only do those members who've experienced rejection belong, but they are clothed with greater honor and given greater respect, because those who are considered the respectable members, those we might consider the norm or the center, well, they don't need that kind of treatment, they don't need any more elevation. But those who have been rejected in their authenticity from families, friendships, churches, and other places time and time again, well, they do need to know, without a doubt, that they are safe in a community to really be who they are and be valued, or they will never cross the threshold. When a community of faith, a local body of Christ, embraces that mode of being, being that space for all people to come and be who they are and be embraced for it, it can be profoundly life-giving. The result, as Paul sees it, is a community of faith without dissension in which people living out their authentic selves become radically interdependent, having equal care for one another, suffering together when one member suffers, and rejoicing together when one member is honored, and where each member brings fully their gifts to the Body of Christ with purpose. We are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it. We, just by being who we are created to be, all have a place and a purpose, and the depth and breadth and diversity of our gifts are absolutely necessary as the Body seeks to live out its mission.

We are the Body of Christ; the Christ who, in his first act of public ministry in the Gospel of Luke, stood up in the temple and read these words:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim  
release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And then he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

At this point in the gospel, Jesus has received the Spirit while praying after his baptism, he has spent time in the wilderness, having been driven there by the Spirit and tested, and now he has come to begin his ministry, empowered by the Spirit, and he begins by saying why he has come. He gives the mission statement for his life and ministry; claims his purpose; his moral agenda. Robert Parham writes, "Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized— the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down, instituting the year

of Jubilee when crushing debts were forgiven and slaves were freed.”<sup>2</sup> Paul’s insistence upon special care for those in the body perceived to be lesser is rooted in the ministry of Christ himself who came to elevate those on the margins. While Paul has called us to shape the inner life of the church in this way, Christ lays the mission before the church to continue his work of shaping the world in this way. Christ’s mission, purpose, moral agenda, has become our mission, purpose, moral agenda as the Body of Christ yet active in the world. Drawn together and empowered by the Spirit with our diversity of gifts, our responsibility as part of this body is to participate in God’s liberating work; to bring good news to the impoverished by not only offering food or a meal, but by asking why they are poor, why so many are poor and hungry, and seeking to address the root causes of poverty; to proclaim release to the captives by working against unjust systems of incarceration and detention that too tend to target the poor and people of color; to address the physical and spiritual needs of the people so that those blind to the humanity and beloved status of those different from them can come to see it, and those suffering physical hindrances can have access to the care and healing they need; to let the oppressed go free by working to dismantle systems that diminish human lives and the life of the planet and establishing ways of structuring our common life together that bring abundant life to all. As the Body of Christ such is our work, and each of us has gifts to contribute, a responsibility to do so, ways to participate in this mission simply by living out our authentic selves, and our diverse gifts working together in this community of care, well, they can change the world, and be life-giving to our neighbors and ourselves. So, my friends, unashamedly be who you are, share who you are, take your place, and fulfill your purpose, and embrace others as they seek to do the same. Lives depend on it.

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<sup>2</sup> As quoted by Ernest Hess, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration (Third Sunday After Epiphany)*, ed. David L. Bartlett; Barbara Brown Taylor. (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2014). Kindle Edition, Kindle Locations 9519.