

Church: Rejoicing Together

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Discipleship Essentials - Part Four: Serving Christ

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Sunday, June 17, 2007

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

This week I asked our Communications Staff to write the story of an impromptu ministry that has been taking place in our church these past few weeks. Perhaps you have already read about it on page 2 of your worship bulletin this morning. If you are new to NPC this morning, let me just say that we are a church without a working elevator. However, we are also a church with a lot of heart. For weeks, our Property Staff and volunteer leaders have been hard at work to obtain parts no longer manufactured for the carriage that takes people from the lower level Fellowship Hall up to the sanctuary and back again. As we have been waiting for those parts... those long-awaited parts... we have had a team of quiet volunteers who have lined up at the downstairs parking lot every Sunday morning with their own cars ready to transport those who needed a lift up to this place of worship.

Our summer Sunday school is focusing on the parables of Jesus, as Dr. Icenogle mentioned during the announcements. And the parable of the NPC elevator is one of a very patient congregation: administrative staff rescheduling meeting places; work crews and sextons hauling tables and chairs without complaint, up and down flights of stairs; ministry groups adapting to different spaces to accomplish the same mission; it is the story of a church with many members working together so that we might rejoice together in faith.

As we read from Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth, let us take his words into our own hearts this morning. He writes: "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Let us pray: Lord, today we recognize and rejoice in the fact that we are called, not just individually but also collectively, to worship and serve you in Christ's name. Equip us, we pray, in our hearing of your Word today, to rejoice together in your Spirit's presence within and among us. And in our rejoicing, may we find ourselves living a new kind of life - one that is worthy of our calling in Jesus' name. Amen.

Have you ever, in your life of Christian witness, had someone tell you that they don't believe in the institution of the church? I'll bet you have. It has become accepted wisdom among many that God doesn't need or really expect us to be part of the church. Sometimes this idea comes from distrust of authority, especially when power has been abused in the church. Sometimes it comes from a strong attitude of individualism and American virtue. Sometimes folks just become cynical and ponder scenarios such as, "Well, if I were stranded on an island, wouldn't I be good with God? After all, I couldn't join a church then." To which, I often reply: "If you end up on an island, yes, God can make an exception." But until we find ourselves on such an island, we need the church. We need the church—not just some of us, but all of us.

Even our own Presbyterian Westminster Confession is so bold as to define the church as the "house and family of God through which [people] are ordinarily saved, and union with which is essential to their best growth and service." I just love the very careful wording we find in the theology of our church. Did you notice that phrase, "through which people are ordinarily saved"? That is an affirmation of God's sovereignty, God's ability to act in people's lives precisely as he wishes, to touch with his grace those both inside, and outside of the church. God can do that. God gets to make those calls. Thanks be to God.

But the confession retains the idea that, under ordinary circumstances, like it or not, we are the regular, ordinary people—none of us an island; we are called to live out our faith within the family of God as members of the body. And it is through our participation in the life of the body that we come to know, not

only our salvation in Christ, but how to live out that salvation, day-to-day. And it is in that day-to-day living out of our faith together in Christian community that we are remade—remade into the image of Christ.

Presbyterian writer Kathleen Morris likens the church to a lot of rough rocks put together in a big plastic container and shaken, and shaken, and shaken for years. Eventually you have a nice collection of smooth stones... and a whole lot of dust. And that theology of the church isn't just made up; it comes to us from Scripture. In verse 19, Paul writes in a passage from this morning: "If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" And earlier, in verse 13, "For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." And Paul writes, "If all were a single member, where would the body be?" He is affirming that we are made — even designed — to live out our faith in community with one another. To live out our faith otherwise is to live contrary to God's design for our lives.

Do you remember last week we spoke about giving witness? I think Paul's theme in this passage is that we are called to give witness not only how each of us lives our lives on our own, but how we live as a community of faith. It's for us to ask each day: What is the witness of the National Presbyterian Church? What are we saying to the community around us about how we are living our faith with one another in community? Is our witness one where all of the members of the body are working in common purpose, rejoicing together in God's presence? When I see stories like I read in this morning's bulletin, I give thanks for broken elevators. They give us opportunity to live out our calling to serve God and to serve one another in the unity of Jesus.

Don't get me wrong; we are going to fix the elevator. I don't want to be copied on any more e-mails with the word "elevator" in the subject line; I really don't! But you know, as well as I do, the best so often comes out in us when the worst is happening around us. Amen.

I've seen too many times in the pastorate, out of the corner of the church, comes a voice... a prayer... a ministry of grace from one or two saints that you know no one else is paying attention to... who remind the whole body about who it is and what it is about. I don't know if you know this about our church staff, but we pray for all of you a lot, as we know you pray for us. Every Tuesday morning at 10:30, somewhere between 25 and 30 of us gather in the parlor to talk about our work. The meeting usually starts with Dr. Icenogle reading from a passage of Scripture, sharing his insight, and then we go around the table, and each shares his own insights as the Spirit blesses them in that moment. And then after that, we settle down into our business. We pull out the church prayer list--you know that blue sheet that gets circulated and is available at the Information Table. From that list, someone will read the names of the people in the hospital, those who have died, those who are recently born, those who are requesting help, and those who have good news and joy to share. And in that sharing, the witness of the members of this congregation comes through. It's a time when those of us who work at the church day-to-day get to speak of the impact that the members of this church have on our lives and our ministries. Through the witness of you, the members of the church, we as a staff are strengthened in our work.

"If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you;' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" "For in one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body....and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." And the body is not limited only to this building, or only to this congregation; it spans the world.

As much as I do not love e-mail, I love the way good news about the body is shared widely through it. I experienced that this week when I received a message from friends and colleagues of mine, Pastors Bob and Stacy Bronkema who sent me an update e-mail about their missionary work in Moscow. Over a year ago, before we moved to Washington, D.C., Bob, Stacy, their four girls and their very big dog came and stayed with us for a couple of nights in Chicago while they were traveling across the country saying good bye to their family and friends before they left for Moscow on their missionary work. And they have been in our prayers ever since that time, as they have answered this new call in ministry. The ministry is focused on the needs of homeless people in Moscow, many of whom are non-Russians, who often experience violence at the hands of extreme nationalists and racists - street gangs - perhaps you have read

about those in the paper, or seen that in the news. Stacy writes in their message, about a defining moment for their ministry regarding a vulnerable family. "This past month," she writes, "a family in our soup kitchen had tragedy strike them. They are a mother, let's call her Gallina, and her daughter, let's call her Irja. They are both homeless and are considered disabled by the Russian government. Because of this, they are able to take part in our ministry. One day Irja disappeared. She was found two days later beaten and in a coma. Her mother stayed by her side until she passed away at the young age of 32. She was a sweet young woman who knew quite a bit of English. Bob would see her periodically on the Metro and [always rejoiced in her smiling face]. A few days later, we had a memorial service for Irja at the soup kitchen. Nearly a dozen volunteers from all over the world (the United States, Spain, Germany, Czech Republic, Brazil) came to give their respects to Irja and share their sorrow with Gallina. Bob was able to pray and preached a short sermon based on Jesus' promise to gather the children unto himself. For many of the clients and volunteers, it was a unique opportunity to hear of the hope we have in Christ. It was also a [time to show our true ministry], which hopes to feed not only the physically hungry, but the spiritually hungry as well."

Reading their letter this week was an opportunity for me to hear about how the body of Christ can be at its very best when impossible challenges and difficulties come. An affirmation of our words from Paul the Apostle this week: members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable; and those members of the body we think less honorable, we clothe with greater honor. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. If one member is honored, all rejoice together in it.

Friends, this is the church - in this place, and around the world - through which ordinary people like you and me discover an extraordinary way of life.

Let us pray: Loving Father, together we make up your church, the beginnings on earth of your eternal kingdom. Help us to hasten the coming of your kingdom in the ways we live out our common life. We need you, and we need each other. In Jesus' name, Amen.