

Healing the Broken Body of Christ

[1 Corinthians 11:17-34](#); [Matthew 17:1-9](#)

Strategic Theme: Becoming a Healing and Reconciling Church

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Transfiguration Sunday Worship at 9:15 and 11

Today again in this sermon, I call attention to our Strategic Theme: that we are becoming a healing and reconciling congregation. When talking about the Corinthian church, Paul declared in I Corinthians 12:

You are the body of Christ, and individually, you are members of it. Give greater honor to the inferior member that there may be no dissention within the body, but members should have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it. If one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

When the Body of Christ is wounded, and all are suffering because of it, who heals the Body of Christ? Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, we are your body. We are gathered to hear your word and share your meal. Feed us now by your real presence and by the power of your Spirit. Heal us as we give you the desires and abilities that we have to work together as your body. Amen.

In his biblical commentary, Jean Calvin said of this text in I Corinthians: "The sacraments have a tendency to exercise us in piety and love." [love, that is, toward God, toward one another, and love toward the world].

Calvin also said of this text:

"There ought never to be a coming together without some fruit [that is, fruit of the Spirit that we grow into: like kindness, patience, joy, love, peace, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control]. Where the Word of God is listened to and the sacraments administered, progress should be made in holiness of life to put off the old self and to advance in newness of life."

Calvin goes on to assess the Corinthian situation: "Everyone was so much taken up with his own interests that he was not prepared to accommodate himself to others, everyone exalted himself and despised others." Then Calvin puts the caper on his analysis of the Corinthian trouble by saying: "A thing is not done at all, if it is not done right."

Wow. From Calvin's perspective, it seems it would be better not to even attempt the Lord's Supper if we are not growing in looking out for one another's best in the church, and we not growing in the practices of mutual love to make the church a stronger community of Christ. Because Communion is not just about me or you, as an individual; it is about us, together, as the Body of Christ – how we treat each other; how we serve one another; how we care about each other; how we make peace with one another.

How many of us came here, today, to partake of Communion for our own benefit? How many of us come to the Table of Jesus to have our individual sins forgiven and feel personally closer to God? How many of us are here for what we get out of Communion, personally and individually? But Calvin invites us to ask a different kind of question: How many of us have come to have Communion so that we will be better empowered to look out for one another? So we will resolve our conflicts and grow stronger as the Body of Christ? How many of us have come to share the Body of Christ in order to see any divisions in this congregation healed?

Communities or organizations do not accomplish much if there are rifts in their ranks. The church loses a significant part of its witness and mission power to the world if it persists in being divided. The witness of Christ to the world through the church is hampered when the church shows the world its refusal or its inability to heal schism.

We are tempted to become so wrapped up in the trouble of our own life together that we forget we exist to bring the Good News of God's love and Christ's grace to the world around us. We begin to think that the church is for me... and not for us together, or for the world. This is one of the difficulties of the Presbyterian Church (USA) as a denomination today -- when we fight such inner battles over, and over, and over again; we somehow then forget that we are a mission to the whole world.

Jesus said in the Gospel of John, chapter 13: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." There's only one clear mark that the world sees that Jesus is present in the church: and that is, that there is a striking difference in this place from the rest of the world—that we actually love one another.

Jesus said these words, according to John, when he was at the last supper with his disciples -- after Judas had received bread from the hand of Jesus, and after Judas went out into the night to betray him. Jesus said these words when he knew that the disciples were divided: Judas was betraying him. Peter would deny him; and all of them would desert him. Jesus said these words in full recognition that his body of followers (right here, with whom he had shared his body and his blood) were in distress, in conflict, and deeply-divided.

We know that our world is profoundly broken into conflicted nations, tribes and partisan groups. Our country is deeply divided between embattled political parties, competing organizational goals, divergent religious purposes, and colliding personal desires.

The Corinthian church, according to this letter from Paul, existed in, as the Greek word says, "schismata." Their schisms were greatly-known to Paul and even to outsiders. Their divisiveness betrayed who they desired to be, and what they portrayed to the world as the unified and integrated body of Jesus Christ. What they said they were, and what they really practiced, were two

different things.

Paul wanted them to be healed from their divisions to “come together” around Christ. But they continued to be pulled apart by their own interests and behaviors. Five times in these verses, Paul asserts: they are coming together, but with the wrong results. Paradoxically, when they came together physically, they revealed how truly divided they were, relationally and spiritually:

verse 17: “When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.”

verse 18: “When you come together as a church... there are divisions among you.”

verse 20: “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s Supper.”

verse 33: “When you come together, wait for one another” [because you aren’t waiting for one another].

verse 34: “When you come together...” eat your personal meals at home so it will not lead to your own condemnation” [since you are practicing such self-indulgence].

The Greek word repeated here for “coming together” is at the root for our very contemporary term, “synergy.” When the Corinthians came together, rather than gain synergy, they lost it. The irony was that their very gatherings revealed how truly fragmented they were. Their coming together showed how they were falling apart. Their superficial attempt at unity uncovered, in fact, their deepest disunity. They were showing the world the very opposite of the nature of Christ and the purpose of the Lord’s Supper.

Even Aristotle understood that the coming together of citizens as the city, or polis could accomplish a common good; as he said:

“For it is possible that the many, though not individually good people, yet when they come together may be better, not individually, but collectively. For when there are many, each individual, it may be argued, has some portion of virtue and wisdom. And when they have “come together,” just as the multitude becomes a single man, with many feet, with many hands, and many senses, so also it becomes one person as regards the moral and intellectual faculties.”

Aristotle affirmed the importance of a unified body politic.

Humanity around us hungers for the possibility and the reality of a clear demonstration of oneness that is made visible and do-able. The church, this congregation, is called by God to demonstrate unity in our disparity and diversity of opinions. If nothing else is true about NPC, we are a congregation of very opinionated people. And some have said “we are an opinionated people on steroids.” The church, this church, is called to be radically different than the commonly-known and exacerbated pattern of dissonant life in Washington DC. We need to countermand the wider American political penchant for extreme partisanship. We are called by Christ to heal our divisions -- not to amplify our differences. We are called by the Spirit of God to be together around Jesus. When we are tempted to hunker down into our individual battle bunkers and take shots at each other, the church must behave differently.

As Paul has surprisingly written, there is a good outcome to going through the chemistry of conflict. Factions ironically reveal the truth about themselves in how they handle the conflict. Their attitudes and actions reveal who is genuine and who is phony in their love of Christ. Remember the story of Solomon and the two mothers? The baby of one mother died; then she claimed to be the mother of another woman’s baby. The conflict revealed which mother was telling the truth and which one was not. The true mother refused to have her child killed, while the false mother didn’t really care. Amazingly, Paul says it is necessary to have conflict. It is real; it is an ordinary reality of every relationship, community, group, and organization, to have conflict: ‘There have to be factions,’ Paul says, ‘among you so that it will become clear who among you, in fact, are genuine.’

Authenticity and genuine love are proven in the face of conflict. As we see how people act and react to one another, their true colors really show. We see who is mature, and immature. We see who is functioning out of resentment, and who is flowing into a river of reconciliation. We see who is entrenched, and who is open to change. We see who is driven by fear, and who is led by love. We see who is kind, and who is obnoxious. We see who is patient, and who is pathological. We see who is nurturing, and who is neurotic.

And in the midst of our conflicts, we see who is living in the Spirit and who is living in the flesh. We see who is full of themselves, or who is full of Christ. We see who feeds on their own agendas, and those who feed on the real presence of Jesus. We see who is approved by God, and who approves themselves. We see who is humble, and who enjoys humiliating others. We see who examines themselves, and who has declared themselves to be The Inquisition. We see who has judged themselves before God, and who has decided to take God’s place to pass judgment on others. We see those who, in fact, attack and abuse or those who restore and reconcile. Conflict reveals our true character.

Individualism and party advocacy is doing what it has always done, as damage to the church. The church is meant to be one Body of Christ. While each individual is loved by Christ and is important to us all in the church, the church cannot be a place where every individual does, or gets, what he or she wants, without sensitivity to everyone else.

Paul calls the church “the Body of Christ.” NPC is a Body of Christ in northwest Washington, DC. It is not to be a disconnected collection of individual advocates and consumers, each lobbying to get what he or she wants from the church. When you come to participate in and join The National Presbyterian Church, you commit yourself to be integrated into the whole body. You are no longer a free agent; you are in the community. And when you join the community, you commit yourself to meeting each other’s needs, as well as your own.

This is counter-cultural. The current interpretation of the American way of life says: you as an individual have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But the way we practice that is to say: “I have the right to what I want, when I want it.” In the church,

we tend to be just like the culture: "I am coming to this church because it feeds me and it meets my needs."

Paul would say to us today: you should come to this church to feed others, and to meet the needs of others. In doing so, your needs for meaning will be met. You join the church to serve others, not so that others will serve you. In America today, churches are in crisis because individuals are pouring into them who demand to have their own individual or family needs met, but frankly, don't want to invest in the common good of the Body of Christ. If a church is being built around meeting individual needs, it does not exist as a place of meeting mutually-interdependent needs. It does not exist as a body, but as a collection of self-centered individuals.

Now there is some good news at the front door for self-centered people (or in our case at the back door -- which is where most of us come in): We welcome you to come as you are. We invite you to take a long look at Jesus to be your Savior and Lord; for Jesus wants to meet you face-to-face and meet your deepest needs: your need for God; your need for human community; your need for eternal purpose and meaning. Jesus wants to save you from your rampant self-centeredness and from a culture of addictive consumerism. Jesus wants to save you from being imprisoned by your own wants, and needs, and demands. Jesus wants to save you -- to free you to serve others inside this body and outside into the world. Jesus wants to save us from ourselves -- our own narrow perspectives, our own limited expectations, our own narcissistic self-determinations, our own drives, hungers and desires that put 'me, first' and 'you, second.' Jesus wants to save us to live in eternal life, in heavenly community -- right here today, right now.

Ken Blanchard, a well-known business consultant who wrote the famous book, *One Minute Manager* has since become a passionate follower of Jesus Christ, and a consultant even for the church in church leadership, discipleship and building Christian community. Blanchard, in a presentation on sharing your gifts and serving the Body of Christ, told this now-famous parable about the nature of good and bad community:

There was a woman who had a dream about Heaven and Hell. An angel took her to Hell. It was a huge banquet room where gourmet food of all kinds was piled on the tables. And lined up on each side of the tables were hungry and starving people trying to eat. But there was great wailing and bitter complaining in the hall, for every person had come to the table with broken arms and, in fact, had straight casts on each arm. When they tried to raise the food to their own mouths, they could not bend their arms and get the food into their own mouths bend their arms. They were starving in front of the glorious meal, and they were angry and resentful.

The angel took the same woman to Heaven. It, too, was a great banquet hall. The people were gathered around tables, chatting and laughing and enjoying being together. She noticed that these, too, had broken arms with straight arm casts. That these, too, could not feed themselves because the casts would not permit it. But she noticed a significant difference from Hell. The people at the tables had learned, while they could not feed themselves, they could turn and feed one another. And so each person listened to the desires of their neighbors and fed each other the food they hungered for at the great feast.

We are not here today to feed ourselves; we are here today to be fed by Jesus. This is his Table. And we are called to feed one another, to serve one another, to love one another. And we pass the bread and the cup to one another, with the words of Jesus. Now, we're not going to take this parable literally today, and have you put the bread in each other's mouths, and the cup up to each other's lips (although I've thought about it). But we are going to share the Lord's Supper with a view to Calvin's concern: that we, in doing so, grow in our passion to love, care for, and serve God, and one another. And in doing so, learn to feed others around us, even the poor in spirit and the hungry in body, even those outside these walls.

The bottom line is this: we cannot heal this body ourselves. We are so personally self-indulgent and self-driven. Only Jesus Christ and God's presence here at the Table, by the power of the Spirit, can heal this body. And so it is that Jesus laid down his life and became the broken body -- that he might offer this to us--that we might become the healed and unified Body of Jesus.

Let us pray. O, Lord Jesus Christ, we now invite you, in the love of God the Father, the grace of who you are, and the power and community of the Holy Spirit, to help us to be a healed community, and to reach out into the world with your reconciling power. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.