

## “Communion and the Body of Christ”

Sermon based on 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and 12:12-27

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This week our congregation marked the passing of two of our beloved members: Victoria Woodworth and Anna Pistole. Some of us attended Victoria’s funeral on Friday and yesterday Anna’s memorial service was held here. Now we gather again for worship as we do every Sunday morning, only today we will celebrate communion, as we do on the first Sunday of every month. All week long I’ve been thinking about the services for Victoria and Anna, on the one hand, and our communion service, on the other hand. And this combination has reminded me of an important truth. The word “communion” as we find it in our religious tradition has a double meaning. First, it refers to our ritual of remembering Jesus’ last supper; and second, it refers to our fellowship with one another, as in “the communion of saints” mentioned in the Apostles’ Creed. It’s the relationship between these two senses of “communion” that I want us now to explore.

The word “communion” means “fellowship” and “participation.” It is related to the word “common,” as when we speak of “our common life” or “the things we share in common.” So, for example, fife-long friends have common memories of shared experiences. The word “communion” is also clearly related to our word “community.” We speak of being a participant in a community or of sharing in someone the lives of others. When Jesus had his last supper with his disciples, this was one of many meals he had shared in common with them over the course of his ministry. Their meals had been not only opportunities to eat and to nourish their

bodies; they were just as much opportunities to have fellowship with one another, to experience community with each other, to share in one another's lives, and thus to participate with their hearts, minds, and souls in the lives of others. When we celebrate the ritual of communion, we remember this meal of Jesus with his disciples and we participate in it ourselves, we share in the experience with them.

In the Apostles' Creed we affirm that, as Christians, we believe "...in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting." What makes death so sad is that our opportunity for fellowship with those who have died is now gone; we can no longer have fellowship with them or they with us; we no longer participate in their lives nor they in ours. But is this really so? Isn't what the creed affirms precisely the opposite, namely, that in spite of death, our lives and the lives of those now gone are bound together by ties so deep that even death cannot break them asunder? As a community of faith that believes in the resurrection of Jesus, we also look forward to our own resurrection. As we grieved the deaths of Anna and Victoria, we did not do so "as others do who have no hope," to quote the apostle Paul when speaking of pagans who assumed that death is the absolute end (1 Thess. 4:13). We grieved their passing with confidence, trusting that the dead are alive with God in Christ. A youth minister I knew growing up once explained to me that the older practice of having a cemetery adjacent to the church was a vivid reminder of what the creed affirms: "I believe in the communion of saints." While we may no longer see Anna and Victoria this side of eternity, we believe they are alive with God; and thus, we rejoice that our ties with them and theirs with us are not broken and never can be broken by death. As the hymn affirms in song, "Blest be the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love."

So, then, the word “communion” in our religious context means both the ritual whereby we remember Jesus’ last supper and our fellowship with one another as Christians, a fellowship that death can not destroy.

So, too, the phrase “body of Christ” has two distinct meanings. First of all, in the ritual of communion, it refers to Jesus’ own body and his self-sacrifice on behalf of others. In remembrance of his sacrifice, we pick up the bread and recall his words: “This is my body which is given for you” (1 Cor. 11:23-24). In the first instance, then, “the body of Christ” refers to the body of Jesus.

The apostle Paul, after talking about the body of Jesus when he is discussing the communion ritual, moves rather quickly to talking about the church as “the body of Christ.” The church as the body of Christ is the community that is based on the act of Jesus’ own self-sacrifice on behalf of others. As such, it is the community of persons committed to self-sacrifice on behalf of others. The church as the body of Christ is a community whose members give of themselves to one another, just as Jesus gave of himself for others.

In his discussion of the church as the body of Christ, Paul wants us to understand that individual Christians are members of the corporate body of Christ. He uses the example of a human body to illustrate his point: just as a human body has many parts (eyes, ears, hands, feet), so too does the body of Christ. Each of us is different and yet we each contribute something really important and even essential to the entire body. I have always thought this was a very illuminating image for clarifying the nature of the church. We Christians belong to one another just as the various parts of a body belong to one another for the proper functioning of the whole.

Paul uses this image of the body to highlight what kind of a community the church is. He insists that each member is indispensable to the body as a whole. Moreover, “those parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable” (1 Cor. 12:22). Paul is writing to the church in Corinth, a sophisticated seaside city in ancient Greece, a very aristocratic, hierarchical society which had definite notions of which persons had real value and which persons didn’t have value. I guess we could say that the church at Corinth was the original “Christ Church by the Sea.” Like Newport Beach in southern California, the church was situated in the midst of a wealthy, sophisticated urban culture with its system of values regarding who’s in and who’s out, who belongs and who doesn’t, who’s important and who’s unimportant. By arguing that even the weaker and the less honorable members of the body are indispensable to the well-being of the whole body, Paul is saying that the church is a counter-cultural community that overturns the inherited system of values of ancient Greek society as to which persons are important and which persons are unimportant. Even slaves and women have value in the Christian community! “In Christ there is neither slave nor free; in Christ there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). And the new non-traditional Christian community even goes against the grain of the inherited Jewish system of values by placing Jews and non-Jews on an equal footing: “In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal. 3:28). As Paul reminds the Corinthians, “we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, [men or women]” (1 Cor. 12:13, with addition). This was revolutionary in the ancient world. This was subversive of inherited values in which some people mattered and others didn’t.

Paul is reminding the Corinthians of what he had already taught them while he was with them in person because things have gone badly for them as a church since he has been absent

from them. Their old pre-Christian attitudes and values have kicked in again, and their church is far from the ideal of which Paul writes. I'm sure we all know the tension here between what we believe the church as the body of Christ is supposed to be and what it actually is. We live in the world with all of its differences and the various values the world places on us depending on our rank, status, profession, wealth, race, gender, and so on and so forth. And then we are also members of the Christian church, the body of Christ, that professes a different set of values, an alternative, counter-cultural set of values and that aspires to be a different kind of human community than what the world knows. None of us is simply a Christian; the church isn't the only community we live in and that shapes our system of values. We are also Americans, we are members of professions, or political parties, or economic classes, or members of special interest groups. We are young or old, male or female, white or black, straight or gay, rich or poor, natural-born citizen or immigrant, college grad or not, etc. The list could go on and on.

Sometimes we feel a sense of harmony between these various identities and our Christian identity while at other times perhaps we feel torn between them. Sometimes we bring the values of the world into the church; that's what happened at Corinth, and why Paul is writing to them to remind them of what a truly Christian church is supposed to look like. At other times, we bring our Christian values into our dealings with the world, as when we are led into protesting the injustices of the world on behalf of our oppressed fellow human beings or engage in acts of genuine kindness to others from whom we have nothing to expect in return. Paul wants us to realize that each member of the body is indispensable to the well-being of the whole and that no one member is more important than any other. That means that the wealthy members are not more important than the poor ones, that the men are not more important than the women, that

children and not only adults are important, that non-white and not only white people are important, and so on. If this is truly the kind of human community the church is supposed to be, what a radical alternative to the world it is. Paul applies this image of the human body to the church so that we may understand and appreciate our inter-dependence with one another within the church as a Christian community based on Christ's love for us. As inter-dependent members of one body, what happens to one member affects us all: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). This is not a characterization of the world in which we live. Far from it! The world in which we live is brutal, ruthless, selfish, uncaring. People starve, while others are fat; homeless people beg on the streets while well-dressed people walk by; people hate one another because of their race or ethnicity or political affiliation. But this is not the way it is supposed to be in the church. Paul is also proposing this image of the human body as a way to understand the church as a community in order that we may learn to appreciate our diversity so that it does not divide us but, rather, enriches us: "that there may be no discord in the body but that the members may have the same care for one another" (1 Cor. 12:25).

The Christian writer C. S. Lewis writes: "The Church is not a human society of people united by their natural affinities [such as nationality or race or class] but the body of Christ, in which all members, however different, must share the common life, complementing and helping one another precisely by their differences." And another Christian writer, Joseph Stowell, explains that: "As we mature spiritually, we exhibit a growing capacity to care for and appreciate one another in the body of Christ, regardless of our differences." So, then, the church is supposed to be one body composed of many members but the members are not all the same: "if

the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body" (1 Cor. 12:16).

Sisters and brothers in Christ, as we seek to evangelize our neighborhood and to invite others to join our church, we may ask ourselves: What do we have to offer to the world? What difference does Christ Church by the Sea make to the world, to Newport Beach? Our answer is the same as Paul's to the Corinthians: We are the body of Christ, founded upon the act of Jesus' own giving of himself to others out of love, that we too may give of ourselves to one another. However imperfectly, nonetheless, we strive to embody this ideal of being a community of mutual love in which each member is equally important, in which we learn to care for one another whatever our differences or whatever our status in the world. We strive to be that kind of community that is an alternative to the world, where "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). We should never take for granted how many people in our world, in our community, right here in Newport Beach don't have what we have but yearn for what we have, people who are lonely, who feel unvalued, unappreciated, unwanted, uncared for. Let's fling open our doors and welcome them in. Even if you are a nobody in the world, you are a somebody in the church!

You've heard me tell how I visited Anna in the hospital shortly before she died. Together with Karen, the three of us celebrated the ritual of communion. I mention this again, because this example brings home how these two meanings of communion come together, how these two meanings of the body of Christ belong together. Anna was one of our own; yet when she was too sick and frail to be with us here in the sanctuary each Sunday, she was not forgotten. She was

not left to die alone by herself. When she couldn't be here to celebrate communion with us, we brought the celebration of communion to her. That's what it means to be the body of Christ.

Kay and I are soon going to visit Paula Knight and celebrate communion with her in the rehab facility. This is what it means to be a member of a church. We are members one of another. We suffer with one another; we rejoice with one another. We commune with one another by sharing our lives with each other. Let us never underestimate the importance of this. Let us never downplay the significance of what it means to be the church, the body of Christ, to be incorporated into the life of Jesus who gave his life for others: "This is my body given for you."

Amen.