

“Scripture: Spirituality and the Body....the Body of Christ” (fn.:DOCUMENT149)

1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 24b-27

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1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 24b-27: ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would 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. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ 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.” ...But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

We are exploring what it means to have a Christian spirituality. So let me remind ourselves about spirituality—it is what brings us life. The root meaning of the word “spirit” in English, in Greek, and in Hebrew is “breath.” And no breath, no life; no spirit, no life—no life with God. Now, unless we are like Moses, who according to the Bible spoke with God face to face,¹ we connect to God in indirect ways. None of us has that sort of direct connection, face to face. Spirituality is always a triangle: we connect to a “here” in order to connect to God. And the primary question becomes “What’s the ‘here’ for you?” What’s that point of connection between your spirit and the Spirit of God?

The “here” of being connected to God comes up in a regular conversation that I have—a repeated pattern when a stranger finds out that I am minister. Here’s an example—this took place just last Sunday on the driving range on the golf course. In this case, a stranger—a nice guy—struck up a conversation—golf, the weather, etc. And then comes the invite—“Hey, you ought to join us on Sunday mornings. We have great group of golfers and you would love it.” I then decline graciously, saying that I am actually already “booked” on Sunday mornings. “Another golf group, huh?” “No, a different sort of group...I am the pastor of First Presbyterian Church.” And then comes the standard response (often with a defensive tone): “Well...uh...uh...I experience God on the golf course. Out here in nature—that’s my church.”

And I want to ask, “What’s God’s message to you? And what’s your response?” Trying not to be judgmental, my sense is that the message is that “God is out there” and “Let me get on with what I am planning here.” My hunch is that my driving range acquaintance does not want God any closer in his life than providing a beautiful day to play golf. That’s enough: God stay in heaven and I’ll keep trying to figure out how to make the little white ball fly toward the hole.

Paul’s understanding of spirituality is much deeper. God does not stay in heaven but enters our world, our history...our lives. God is a “busy-body”—entering our world in Jesus Christ. That’s the

¹ Exodus 33:11—“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”

message of Christmas every year: God moves into our neighborhood. And we experience God's Spirit in Jesus—that's the "here" to which we keep coming back.

So, where's Jesus? In that conversation that I have over and over again—the person who experiences God on the beach, on the mountains, on the water, in a sunset—the response seems always to be "I experience God." And that's a worthy experience, a profound experience, even a noble experience. But rarely does anyone ever say to me, "I experience Jesus."

You may recall that the Apostle Paul was a spiritual person before he was a follower of Christ. He was deeply committed to the one God, the God of the Ten Commandments, the God of Moses and prophets. Paul was not one of Jesus' original followers, such as Peter, James, and John. Indeed Paul sought to wipe out the early movement of Jesus' followers, the church.

And we know Paul's turning point in spirituality, told three times in the book of Acts (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). The details of each telling vary in minor details, but here is the kernel of the story: Paul, then known by his Jewish name of Saul, was on the way to Damascus to eradicate a pest problem—the pest problem was the Christian movement among Jews—a false spirituality for Saul. And, there on the road to Damascus, Saul encounters the risen Jesus. What Jesus says (in all three accounts) is this: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul was not persecuting Jesus; he was persecuting the church! But the risen Jesus' question is not "Why are you persecuting the church?" but "Why are you persecuting me?" From the beginning of Paul's Christian discipleship, he encounters this identity between the risen Christ and the church.

So, it is no surprise in our Scripture for today that Paul says the church is the body of Christ. Paul does not say this as a metaphor, as an analogy, as a parable. He says the church IS the body of Christ. Now Paul does have multiple nuances for "body"—the body of Christ.

- Body of Christ: sometimes Paul means the body, the person of Jesus, who was hung on cross. The Roman Catholic tradition of crucifix fits here—the cross bears the body of Christ.
- Body of Christ: sometimes Paul means the body in Communion—that bread on the table. The bread is the body of Christ. Christian spirituality has certainly divided on how Christ is present in the bread...but not whether Christ is present. Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, Orthodox, and so on—we all agree on the real presence of Christ at the table, just not the manner or the "how."

So Paul has a broad sense of "the body of Christ."

But when it comes to experiencing the Spirit, Paul is all about the body. Here is where I part company with the general spirituality of my friend on the golf course and other forms of spirituality. Where's the body?

- Are you in Christ, serving as his hands and feet? That's Christian spirituality.
- Am I nurtured by the body as we gather at the table? That's Christian spirituality.
- Do we keep coming back to the awe that marks such hymns as *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* and *The Old Rugged Cross*? How could God choose the way of the cross? This challenging presence of God in one of the worst forms of capital punishment that humans have created...that's Christian spirituality.

- Do I see that I am connected to others...that I am not independent...that where two or three are gathered that Jesus promised to present? That's Christian spirituality.

Now, you might think the conclusion is this: You have to be part of the church to be spiritual. No, that's not the case. Again, look back to the Apostle Paul. He did not meet Jesus in a church setting. He did not answer the call at a crusade. He did not grow up in a Christian family. Encountering the risen Jesus took place outside the church community—God is free. God is outside of the church—there is spirituality that longs for justice, a spirituality that longs for peace, a spirituality that longs to take care of this wonderful world. And God in Christ acts outside of the church.

But is that outside spirituality sustainable? Does it breathe life? So, back to my friend on the golf course; he may be satisfied with his spirituality. It is enough that God's in heaven and the weather is nice. But is that enough?

About 15 years ago, I had a pastoral conversation with a young adult (early thirties), new to fatherhood with a daughter just a few months old. I'll not use his real name, so let's call him "Randy." Randy wanted to know how to have a faith like mine. What a compliment! Randy had come to talk to me after a sermon entitled "The Difficult Stuff." It was December and I had written a sermon that I had entitled "The Difficult Stuff?"—a solid sermon about Mary's predicament with the prospect of being an unwed mother. However, late in the week and long after the bulletin was printed with the sermon title, on the Friday of that week, the police came to our home and arrested our son on felony charges and he spent the next three months in the county jail. The arrest of the minister's son makes the newspaper in a South Carolina town—it goes viral on the grapevine communications of a congregation. And, so the sermon on "The Difficult Stuff" went into the trash can. Instead, I simply acknowledged what most everyone knew and I gave three Scripture texts that were sustaining me in "The Difficult Stuff."

Well, Randy came to me and asked how he could have a faith like mine. Could I package it up and give it to him? I wanted to...but I couldn't give him Mr. Scarr and Mrs. Brumby who loved me during hours of Sunday School—and I was not an easy child. I couldn't give him the youth retreats and Christmas Eve services. I couldn't share the pastors who knew me, loved me, and cared for me. I could not donate my parents who lived with this absolute—it did not matter how late you stayed out on Saturday night or whether you were home or not, you found a place to worship on Sunday mornings. What I could not give him were all those experiences of the body of Christ.

Within a couple of months, Randy was dead—a drug overdose (accidental, or maybe not?). Even more tragic, his parents lost both their adult children—Randy and their other son - to drug overdoses. What an emptiness marked their lives!

This story is extreme—may God preserve us all from such extremes. Randy had wanted to know about spirituality...a spirituality that sustains.

I can only bear this witness: for many...for most (I will not say "for all"—God only knows that)—the spirituality that sustains comes in connection to the body. I think that is why the location for the origin of those songs we call "spirituals" is the body. Those African-American spirituals did not arise outside the community of faith, apart from the body. Songs such as *Deep River*, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, *Were You There*, *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, *There Is a Balm in Gilead*, *Everytime I Feel*

the Spirit, O When the Saints Come Marching In—these and many others came out of engagement with the Bible, with fellowship, with worship, with preaching, with regular prayer, and the like.

Spirituals...spirituality...it comes in the body...the body of Christ. And so we say in the creed: I believe in the Holy Ghost—Ghost, that old English word for “spirit.” And we immediately follow that affirmation with “the holy catholic church”—the body of Christ. May you find that Spirit of Christ in this “here!”