

Sermon Title: “God Has Bound Us To Each Other”

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Preached At: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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There is a magazine that arrives in our church mailbox every few months that is full of very good and interesting content about faith and culture in the twenty-first century—book reviews, music recommendations, fairly thoughtful articles.

But there is one part that regularly makes me scratch my head. It’s called “The View From the Pew” and it is essentially a “review” of a given church.

The church could be from any city, any size, any denomination, whatever. It is meant to be a “subjective impression of a brief encounter with a local body of believers”—a kind of, “here’s what you might experience as a newcomer if you came here.”

On one level it sounds like a good idea. It might be kind of nice to know what to expect, after all. Many of us who have had the experience of being in a new place and looking for a church would probably have appreciated something like this.

But something about this feature makes me very uneasy. Maybe it’s because of how the reviews are framed. At the end, each aspect of the worship experience is given a rating from 1-10. The particular church from New York that I read about this week received the following:

- 4 for “Friendliness”
- 6 for “Amenities” (this seems mainly to have to do with the quality of the coffee),
- 10 for “Music” (impressive!)
- 8.5 for the “Sermon” (“a few references that made me shudder, but also empathetic, intelligent, and provocative”)
- 9 for the overall “Vibe.”

Now, I’m not naïve enough to think that this isn’t precisely the kind of inventory that is going on in many people’s heads during many worship services, but seeing it on paper was a little unsettling. I wasn’t very anxious to volunteer for that kind of scrutiny!

But aside from my own personal reservations about this exercise, I worry about what this sort of consumer approach to church has to say about *what we understand the church to be* and what our role in this is.

Is the church a product put together by professionals that is subjected to the consumers’ evaluation? Is it kind of like buying a car where we analyze all of the different elements—fuel economy, appearance, power, number of cup holders, built in GPS and

mp3 capacity, air conditioning, etc.—and then make our decision based on the aggregate result?

What kind of a theology of the church does “the view from the pew” communicate?

Our text this morning gives us a very different picture of the nature of the church and our role within it.

We are given the picture not of the church as a weekly religious performance that is to be subjected to the scrutiny of the audience, but of a *body*.

Paul talks about *members* not *consumers*.

To the church in Corinth, Paul offers a very concrete picture of who they are and how they are to live: “You are the body of Christ.”

It’s worth pondering the nature of the first recipients of these words. Even if we only rewind one chapter to 1 Corinthians 11, we see this is a church struggling with sexual immorality, a church that is bickering, that is characterized by infighting, divisions, abuse and neglect of the poor, and bad theology (which is surely the most grievous of sins ☺)....

To *this* church, Paul says... “You are the body of Christ. You need each other. Each part is essential. Collectively, you re-present Jesus!”

The church as “the body of Christ” is a familiar metaphor that applies on a number of levels.

First, we could think on the level of individual congregations. Yesterday was our church’s AGM, and we spent time affirming how the members of our “body” were already working together, as well as discerning and calling new people to serve in new capacities.

I think that here at Lethbridge Mennonite, we have much to be thankful for in how we are already putting Paul’s words to the Corinthians into practice. We are a community that affirms many voices, which seeks to give honour and dignity to everyone. We suffer and rejoice with one another.

We are not perfect, of course. No church is. There is no church that does not have to remain vigilant against the formation of divisions or the overvaluation of some gifts and the neglect of others. Paul’s vision of the body of Christ working in harmony and mutuality is a reality that we will always be seeking to live more fully into.

But we are pointed in the right direction—in the direction of love (as Paul will spend more time on in the very next chapter, 1 Corinthians 13!), of humility, of honouring and

respecting one another and properly employing the wide diversity of gifts God has given us.

We could also think about the “body of Christ” on a more global level.

Last Sunday, Mike Nimz talked about the important contribution that Anabaptist theology and practice can make in a post-Christendom world.

This is good, as far as it goes. It is important to understand who we are as Mennonites, to understand our history, to understand some of the ways in which our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus might differ from Christians from other backgrounds and traditions.

But it is *just* as important to understand that Mennonites are not the one and only true shining light of God’s family, that there are some things that others might see more clearly than us, that we have things to learn from our sisters and brothers from other denominations.

It is *just* as important to recognize that we are part of a very large and diverse global body, and that we each contribute something unique in our worship, in our theology, in our expression of our understanding of the big story of which we are all a part.

Just as Paul reminds the Corinthians that not all are prophets, teachers, administrators, speakers in tongues, etc. in the *local* church, so in the *global* family of faith, we do not all perform the same role.

A few weeks ago, we gathered as members of the Downtown Churches Ministerial. For the opening, the representative from the Roman Catholic read this reflection:

When God puts us back together again, this great church will be marked by the dignity and scholarship of the Anglicans, the order and sacraments of the Roman Catholics, the warm fellowship of the Methodists, the Presbyterian desire for good preaching, the Lutheran respect for sound theology.

There will be the Baptist concern for individual salvation, the Congregational respect for the rights of lay members, the Pentecostal reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit and the Quaker appreciation for silence.

We will find there the Mennonite sense of community, the social action of the Salvation Army, the social justice of the United and the Reformed love of the Bible, all wrapped in Orthodox reverence before the Mystery of God.

A good picture of the body of Christ—with each member doing its unique part, collectively expressing what no individual member (or denomination) could do on its own. Thank God for diversity!

Now, I know that some of you have heard many sermons on the church as the body of Christ and that you may be thinking, “OK, I get the image, I understand what the passage is saying...

... but if we are the body of Christ, why don't we *look* more like the body of Christ.

Why is the body of Christ sometimes so unattractive and misshapen? How can Christians behave in such ugly ways towards each other?

And why do we seem to so often do *precisely* what Paul warns against in this passage?

Paul says in verse 21 that “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 is this not *exactly* what we see happening in churches around the world?

We disagree about something, and we leave. The pastor says something we don't like, and we leave. The worship doesn't move us, and we leave. We have an interpersonal conflict with someone in the church, and we leave.

We say, in effect, “I have no need of you.”

This is what the church tragically looks like in a culture where the customer is always right and where our choices as consumers reign supreme.

But it doesn't just apply to today. From at least the 16th century onward, the church of Jesus Christ has exhibited a truly remarkable capacity for splintering and splitting and founding new denominations, and labeling others heretics and ourselves the “true believers” who alone understand God correctly.

The church has historically been very good at saying, in word or deed, “I have no need for you”—no need for those who don't understand correctly, who don't behave correctly, or whatever.

This is our history... and this is our present. I heard on the radio this week that there are something like 39 000 Protestant denominations in the world. 39 000!!

Surely, whatever we might say about the goodness of diversity, this is not the way that God would intend for it to come about... And certainly, this doesn't seem to present a very good image to a watching world! I'm sure that you have heard many people snort

in derision when the topic of the church comes up. “Why would I want anything to do with the church? You all can’t agree on anything!”

What can we say about these things?

Well, I think the first thing that needs to be said is simply that, whatever the church’s failings and in whatever ways we have practically ignored Paul’s message to the church in Corinth about how we cannot just cut ourselves off from one another, the church was, is, and remains a divinely instituted reality.

The body of Christ is not something that we have to manufacture on our own, it is not even something that we have to make sure that we “get right” in order for it to work as it was intended to.

The church is a creation of God.

Of course, we must always strive for unity, we must always work to reflect the nature of this body, we must constantly be seeking to discern and live out our unique roles within this body, but we will never get it exactly right, and God knows this.

There will always be critics of the church. Sometimes their criticisms will be justified and will represent a prophetic word to the church to repent; sometimes they will be poorly founded and vindictive.

Whatever the case may be, whether the body is performing well with each part fulfilling its role with wonderful efficiency and harmony or the body appears to be all out of sorts with nothing working the way it ought to, ***it remains the body of Christ.***

We should never forget that God specializes in working through things that appear less than impressive. Indeed, this seems to be one of the main ways in which God has chosen to work throughout history!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it very well in *Life Together*:

Christian community is a gift of God to which we have no claim. **Only God knows the real condition of either our community or our sanctification. What may appear weak and insignificant to us may be great and glorious to God.** Just as Christians should not constantly be feeling the pulse of their spiritual life, so too the Christian community has not been given to us by God for us to be continually taking its temperature. The more thankfully we daily receive what is given to us, the more assuredly and consistently will community increase and grow from day to day as God pleases.

Christian community is not an ideal we have to realize, but rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our community is Jesus Christ alone, the more calmly we will learn to think about our community and pray and hope for it.¹

The second thing to say is that **God has bound himself to his people**—people who abuse him, mistreat him, misunderstand and represent him poorly and inadequately to the world.

God has always placed himself in the hands of human beings—from the ancient people of Israel and their fumbling efforts to be a light to the nations, to the manger in Bethlehem, to the cross on Golgotha, to two thousand years of the church.... God has *given* himself to us, and God has *entrusted* himself to us.

Whether we are worthy of his trust or not.

So, God has bound himself to us, and God has bound us to each other.

God has not given us the option of a privatized spirituality where we blissfully contemplate divine mysteries or endlessly attend to the inner ruminations of our soul all by ourselves or exclusively with those who are just like us.

God has set things up so that we need each other. Whether we realize it or not. *We need each other.*

In a culture of individualism, a culture of consumerism, a culture addicted to all kinds of unhealthy patterns of relating to one another and organizing ourselves, the church needs to truly *be* the body of Christ.

The world is in desperate need of a model of health and sacrifice, of humility and equality, of truly sharing in joy and in sorrow.

The world desperately needs to see a community that sticks with one another even when our preferences aren't being met, even when—*especially* when—we might annoy each other, let each other down, and misunderstand each other.

The world desperately needs to see a community where love is real and true, where it is not a romanticized Hollywood tale or a lust-fuelled false ideal of youth and beauty, but a settled commitment that we are in this journey of faith and discipleship together—and that the “togetherness” is not an optional extra, but an essential part of the journey.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 38.

God has bound us to each other.

And so may we joyfully live into this reality that God has created. May we be truly be the body of Christ for the sake of the world God loves.

Amen.