

**Sermon for the Third Sunday After Epiphany
Year C**

[RCL] Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21; Psalm 19

In many dioceses, this month marks an important time for annual meetings in congregations. At these times, we necessarily focus on “the Church” - how things have been going for the last year and what we plan for the next year. But at such meetings, we also often pause to remind ourselves about what the Church is and what it is not.

A usual starting point is to declare that the place where we worship is not the Church. Rather, this building is a structure in which the Church gathers for solace and pardon and strength and renewal and for inspiration to become more fully what the Church is – the body of Christ.

In today’s Epistle, we received a reminder from St. Paul that all together we, the Church, are, in fact, “the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

We remember, too, that the clergy and the vestry are not the Church. Sunday School teachers are not the Church. Outreach ministers are not the Church. The altar guild, acolytes, and lay readers are not the Church. No one person, no one group, and no one activity can become the Church for us. The Church IS the body of Christ.

The Church is NOT something to belong to. Nevertheless, sometimes people talk about joining the Church like they do about joining the Rotary Club or the PTA or the Boy Scouts or the Girl Scouts. Those who do affiliate with such organizations pay dues to them, attend meetings when they feel like it, and turn in their membership cards when they grow tired of the organization’s activities or become angry at what it does or the changes it makes. The Church, committed to God, is very different, of course. It is – we are – the body of Christ.

Neither is the Church something to watch on television as interested spectators. For us, the Church is participatory. We are necessarily partakers and contributors. We are not like the audience at a concert, but we are like members of the orchestra making the music – God’s music to which we dance in our daily lives, following our Christian values.

We are the body of Christ, and each of us individually is a member of it. But we are not individuals WITHOUT the body – only WITHIN it. In a way, our faith and tradition create a certain conflict with the rugged and independent-minded individualism that has formed so much of the American culture. We are not Christians alone; we are not separate actors choosing our own views without reference to the faith. Always, we are together – parts of the whole. And our congregations, the Church, are part of the body of Christ.

St. Paul drives home this point as he expands his view of the body of Christ by using the image of a human body. He enlightens us with telling examples of its parts – hand, ear, eye, nose, feet, and head. Each has its special function. As we consider what we are as the Church, we do well to remember this. As different parts of a human body make their contributions, each of us finds a particular contribution to the Church, finding a ministry that suits us and complements the others.

And, we expand these ministries beyond the confines of the congregation as we all apply our ministries in making the work of Christ effective in our daily lives for the sake of all around us.

But, we dare not forget to balance these individual roles following another aspect of St. Paul's analogy. It takes all parts of a human body working together to produce the functioning of a healthy one. We must work together, recognizing the equal importance of all ministries and all members and all people. St. Paul illustrates this in language we can never forget. "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.'" Each, he insists, is equally indispensable. All of us, doing our parts, are indispensable.

And, we must also expand this view beyond the confines of the Church. In the broken and fearful and often desperate world in which we live, conflict and contention and extremism and lack of civility on many sides seem to have become the rule instead of the exception. Far too often, people in all sections of our country and of the world choose sides, ascribe to an "us versus them" mentality, and draw lines in the sand. How can we take Paul's wisdom that no one can say "I have no need of you" and extend it to all people and all places to make this sense of Christ-like unity understood and accepted?

As the body of Christ, we are the activity and the continuing presence of Jesus in the world. We become the Resurrection. The Church is the means by which Christ remains involved in the world. So, we, his body, are Christ's representatives on earth.

We, the Church, are Christ for others – at work, at home, at school, in the community, and in the life of our congregations.

It might help today to remind ourselves of a teaching from the Outline of Faith, the Catechism, on page 555 of the Prayer Book:

"What is the mission of the Church," we ask. And we learn that the mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.

When we ask, "How does the Church pursue its mission?" We learn that, "the Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships and proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace and love."

And finally, we ask, "Through who does the Church carry out its mission?" And we are reminded that, "The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members."

The various ministries that we employ as part of the Church allow us to engage in the great mission of the body of Christ, following the challenges that Jesus lays before us. They represent how we actively serve as Christ's continuing presence in the world.

What our world needs is for us to be the body of Christ. And how we begin to do that might well be found in today's Gospel. The very first thing Jesus did as he began his ministry was to go into the midst of the community in which he had lived his entire life and declare what the world needed. He did so by reading from the Prophet Isaiah.

How do we, as the continuing body of Christ, in our time and our places do what Jesus read about? How, in word and in action, do we “bring good news to the poor?” How do we, in word and in action, “proclaim relief to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind?” How do we, in word and in action, “let the oppressed go free?”

How do we, in the expression of the catechism, “proclaim the Gospel, and promote justice, peace and love?”

A fearful and anxious world, filled with far too many people who are hungry and oppressed, wounded and hopeless, await an answer from the Church – from us – the body of Christ.

Written by The Rev. Ken Kesselus

The Rev. Ken Kesselus is a retired priest living with his wife Toni in his native home of Bastrop, Texas, where he serves as the mayor and writes history book and a column in the local newspaper. He is a former member of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church and author John E. Hines: Granite on Fire.

Published by the Office of Mission Communications of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

© 2015 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.