

The Body of Christ

Seventh Sunday of Easter, Year B – John 17:6-19

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, May 20, 2012

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

With the great Feast of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, coming as it does this year on Memorial Day weekend when, I am told, many of our Parish will be making our first seasonal pilgrimage to lake or mountain, I figured this morning was my best chance to say a few important things about the Church. Oh, perhaps you'll recognize a few things about the Episcopal Church in particular, but what I really want to talk to you about this morning is ecclesiology, the theology of the Church, with a capital "C." You know, the "one holy catholic and apostolic Church" we're always talking about toward the end of the Nicene Creed. The one that nearly every week we say we believe in. You see, there are a few things we need to remember about the Church when we are tempted to think that we are somehow different than, somehow distinct from, somehow *better* than the church next door or down the street. There are a few things we need to remember when we get to thinking that things would be better off if *we* were in charge. There are a few things we need to remember every time we say those words from the Nicene Creed, every time we pray for one another and for the Church. Though I have personally sat through several semester-long seminary classes on the subject, and have, in the [mumble-mumble] years since, pondered a great many things that I need to remember about the Church, I will restrain myself this morning and talk about only three.

The first thing of which I will remind you this morning is that the Church is *alive*. The Church is not stone and mortar and stained glass. Nor is the Church some sort of static, monolithic, immovable and immobile organization. The Church is a living, sometimes breathing, sometimes growing, always moving, *organism*. In its life, the Church has endured schism, the rending of one part of the Body of Christ from another, since shortly after *Saint Peter* and *Saint Paul* fought tooth and claw about who should be allowed to be part of the Church at the *first* general convention. In its life, the Church has made war and it has made peace. In its life, the Church has oppressed and it has liberated. But at no time in its life has the old refrain *ever* been literally true: "but we've *always* done it that way."

Always, *always* the Church has grown and has moved and has changed, like any other living, breathing organism. Make no mistake, the Church *will* grow, and the Church *will* move, and the Church *will* change. And, dear friends, the Church *must* grow and move and change if we are to be the Body of Christ, if we are to see the face of Christ in our brother and our sister, if we are to live out our mission to *be* Christ in the world.

The Church is alive because the Church is *people*. The Church is made up of fragile, fallible human beings like you and like me. The Church is bits of clay animated by the breath of the Creator of all that is, made at the dawn of creation into the Creator's image and likeness, formed to return the love of the Creator and to share that love with each other. Instead, we took that love so freely given and curved it in to our own selfish souls, until the image of God was barely discernible in us. The Church is made up of such creatures, lost in our own twisted, confused misunderstanding of love. But "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The Church is such believers.

Over the two thousand years of the Church's life, some of us have been saints. We celebrate apostles and martyrs that literally poured out their lives to spread the Good News of Christ. We read of kings and queens who gave of their wealth and their power to speak of the sovereignty of *Christ*. We sing songs about the monks and preachers and theologians and scholars who have taught us new and wonderful things about God's grace, about his mercy, about his love. And we have seen and heard, touched and been touched *by* saints near and dear to us who have,

by a whispered word in crisis, or a smile of encouragement, or a forehead kissed at bedtime, taught us and molded us and reminded us that in Christ we not only *know* of God's love, we have it in our hearts.

Through the life of the Church, some of us have been saints, but *all* of us are sinners. We are not part of the Church because we are so good and so perfect that we *deserve* to be here. We are, rather, sinners that recognize that it is only through blood spilt one dark afternoon on a cross that we have any claim to be the Body of Christ. It is only through the grace and love of Christ that we can stand before God cleansed, redeemed and on our way, however haltingly, toward being made holy.

The Church is saints. The Church is sinners. The Church is fragile human beings trying, with God's own help, to live lives that are holy and righteous, trying, with God's help, to love and serve others in his name, trying, with God's help, to offer some poor measure of worship to the One who has done literally everything for us, some poor imitation of the prayers of the saints now made perfect as they offer their prayers before the Throne of Heaven.

Finally, let me remind you that our hope is not built on the brick and mortar of even so beautiful an edifice as this. Nor is our hope built on our own finite, fragile flesh. "The Church's one foundation," the old hymn proclaims, "is Jesus Christ her Lord!" Our hope and our faith and our eternal salvation is built on the solid rock of Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and coming again. Lest we should worry and fret over the fate of the Church, lest we should wring our hands over elections or cluck our tongues at the pronouncements of councils, lest we should say, to ourselves or aloud, "this will surely be the end," let me call your attention back to this morning's Gospel lesson, to our Lord's great prayer to the Father to "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

The Church is not ours, no matter how widely we mean the "ours." The Church belongs to Jesus Christ. We are his. We belong to him. We have been bought from the bondage of sin and death and we have been given to Christ. And he has declared that he has lost none of those that he was given. Not you. Not me. Not the church with a little "c." Not the Church with a capital "C." Dear friends, the Church is safe within the nail-scarred hands of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The One that calmed the raging sea, the One that took children in his arms, the One that broke the bread and blessed the cup, that One still offers his own body and blood, that One still holds his children safe, our Lord is still able to hold us through *whatever* storms may come, and will surely bring us home.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.