

**Epiphany 3, Year C**  
**January 27, 2019**  
**The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew**

In his First Letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul introduces us to a metaphor that has come to have great significance in Christian communities. Paul says: **“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.”** As was his practice, Paul took something familiar from the context in which he found himself and recast it so that we can comprehend it in a new way. The metaphor of understanding a community in terms of a body was not original to Paul. What is novel is that instead of using the notion of a body to support the legitimacy of hierarchy, reinforcing the importance of some over others, Paul used this familiar metaphor to show that *all* parts of the body have value, as do all people. Paul had a true gift for taking cultural assumptions and holding them up to the light of Christ, so that we might see as Jesus sees. He upended traditional notions of value in the culture, saying: **“But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.”**

Where might Paul have gotten his fondness for changing one's perspective? What would lead him to teach that God wants us to prioritize how we treat the people we usually think of as inferior? His source is no less than Jesus himself, whose introduction to public ministry includes the proclamation of his own personal mission statement:

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free....**

Jesus, like Paul, was not working with original material. He was quoting the prophet Isaiah. But Jesus made Isaiah's proclamation of the work of a future prophet a reality, stating: **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."**

God's Holy Spirit—the Spirit who inspired the prophet Isaiah; who filled Mary, the mother of Jesus so that she might bear God's child; who filled Jesus at his baptism by John; who drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan following his baptism; whom Jesus claims as anointing him for ministry; and who Paul reminds us baptizes us all into one body—**that** Spirit is the one who moves both within and among God's people to accomplish God's work in the world. From the beginning, the very beginning as in the Book of Genesis, God has chosen to dwell in

community; to create and include; to choose the least, the lost, and often the most unlikely to do the work of God. People throughout time have often been puzzled, skeptical, incredulous, and even offended by the unexpected choices of God. What are we to think when God chooses barren couples to be the bearers of holy children? Why would God choose the trickster brother, or the dreamer who never did any hard work, or the youngest one who was tending the sheep, when seemingly better alternatives were available? Why on earth would God put a prostitute named Rahab, a foreigner named Ruth, and Bathsheba—identified as the wife of a murdered man—as prominent women in the genealogy of Jesus? Why would Jesus decide to spend his time with tax collectors, lepers, sinners, and Gentiles? Why would Jesus tell parables in which the unclean, the badly behaved, and the enemies of those listening were cast as the good guys?

The Good News of the Gospel is that no one is left out. Jesus tells his disciples in the Great Commission to make disciples of **all** nations. The bad news is that it can be hard to accept that no one is left out—no one. The early Church struggled with what that meant. Did non-Jewish people have to become Jewish first in order to follow Jesus? The Church's answer was

yes—until the Holy Spirit decided to descend upon people who weren't Jewish. The Church has wrestled throughout time to understand what it means when we say *all*. We, as part of the Body of Christ, are continually challenged to take to heart Paul's image of valuing all of our sisters and brothers as essential to our whole being, particularly those we might not notice, appreciate, like, or trust. Martin Luther King, Junior in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, gave us another image for understanding our mutual interconnectedness:

**...all men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the inter-related structure of reality.**

The importance of learning that we are an essential part of one another in the Body of Christ, or in the **"inescapable network of mutuality,"** was the foundation of the Elizabethan Compromise, the end of the wild swings between Protestantism and Catholicism in the Church of England that led one side to persecute and kill members of the other whenever it was in power. Rather than insisting that unity be obtained through uniformity, Queen Elizabeth I instead created room within the

Church for a wide range of theology and practice, basing our unity in our common worship and fellowship.

This has never been an easy practice. While decidedly biblical, it is also messy, frustrating, and often clear only in retrospect, which sounds a lot like life itself. Fortunately this way of including others as we worship and build community together also creates possibilities for love, respect, joy and laughter, along with—we hope—room for the Holy Spirit. This is how we do theology, with relationships first, beginning with God and then one another. Bible scholar and Episcopal priest William Countryman says this is **“Because our theology is built on gathering together *first* rather than after we all agree.”**

At Christ Church we continue to live into the challenge of building on a foundation of shared worship and relationships. Likely we will not all agree on everything. What we can agree to, however, is to follow Jesus in ways that are based on our shared love of God, mutual respect, and a willingness to listen and learn from others. And, we hope, to leaving room for the Holy Spirit to lead us in ways that continue to surprise.

Amen

