

The Austin Heights Conspiracy

I Corinthians 12:12-31

The Third Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 27) 2019

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We don't have to go far or look long to discover all kinds of conspiracy theories about almost anything. What used to be the arena for a few crackpots and their poorly mimeographed newsletters sent through the mail to each other, now has hit the jackpot with the Web, blogs, YouTube, and social media.

Modern conspiracy theories tend to assume that everything happens for a reason and there is some secret organization (usually the government) behind the various happenings. For example, a few years ago, out in West Texas a hunter killed what he thought was a coyote, which turned out to be some sort of crossbreed of wolves and dogs. Before long, there were conspiracy theories showing up all over about secret government research and that wherever these "wolf-dogs" had been spotted, soon thereafter men in black suits showed up with the result that no one ever talked about it again. All of this was explained on the internet with the concluding statement: "Check it out. These are just facts."

There are conspiracy theories about the contrails we see from jet aircraft as they fly high overhead on a sunny day. It says the U.S. government sends the planes overhead and what we think of, as vapor trails are really chemicals being sprayed on us. Or there are the theories about the Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico which was the result either of a North Korean submarine torpedo or of a radical environmental terrorist cell blowing it up – or the two working together. Rush Limbaugh, among the kings of conspiracy theorists, has

supported both of these theories. There are multiple theories about such things as various missing airline flights, or Area 51 and aliens, the Bermuda Triangle, Sasquatch, the Loch Ness monster, Elvis did not die but is alive and well. Hitler did not commit suicide in Berlin but escaped to Argentina or Antarctica or the moon, and lived a long and good life. There are hundreds, if not thousands of theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, theories denying the Holocaust, theories about the Vatican, theories about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, theories about 9/11, about the Sandy Hook school shooting, theories about the fluoridation of water, vaccinations, the Deep State, the Clintons, Barak Obama, the New England Patriots, the Flat Earth, and about the Russians rigging the 2016 election – Wait! That’s not a theory. That’s a fact. Just check it out.

Not to be left out, or left behind, Austin Heights Baptist Church is part of a conspiracy, too. We are a cell of an internationalist organization that seeks to transcend borders and border walls, resist powers of death and domination, promotes and spreads peace, justice, mercy, grace and love. It is called “the church” and it is a conspiracy. Conspire is from two Latin words meaning, “to breathe together.” That’s what we do: together we breathe in the Holy Spirit.

I like the parts of our worship when we breathe together and breathe upon one another, sharing the Holy Spirit. You might not have thought that’s what we’re doing but it is. Every time we do responsive readings or sing hymns or share prayer requests we are breathing the Holy Spirit together back and forth, call and response. Back and forth we breathe, back and forth we speak and listen, back and forth we speak to God and allow God to speak back to us, breathe into us. We are conspiring together. When we go to Zion Hill or Iron Wheel, we love the call and

response of preacher and congregation – the give and take, the back and forth of breathing together.

And when we sing hymns – and I remind you part of learning to be Christian is learning to sing hymns with everyone else. The issue has nothing to do with whether you think you can sing or not and it has nothing to do with how you feel. It has everything to do with joining your voice and your breath with your sisters and brothers all for the praise and glory of God. In turn, when we sing together, the Holy Spirit is also breathing into us. If you don't sing and you stand there with your mouth shut, you're not breathing together the Holy Spirit. You're missing out (no wonder you feel bad!).

John tells us that on the Easter evening of Jesus' resurrection Jesus appeared to the fear-filled disciples. Before he left, John says, "He breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22). Being the church, being the body of Christ, is about call and response, back and forth, breathing, talking, listening – conspiring, breathing. Sometimes in worship we read responsively and it is ritualized and other times it might be more spontaneous like when we share prayer requests. But the Holy Spirit is breathing into us through all of these times. In antiphon we are talking to God together.

You all know of my long-time, deep friendship with five other minister friends. Together we call ourselves the Neighborhood and we've been meeting together twice a year for twenty-nine years. But in between our gatherings, we are talking to one another almost daily. By phone calls, emails, and text messaging we talk, listen, share news, comment on news, keep up with each other's families, what we're doing, what we're reading, and on and on. Every day. We pray for one

another and share our deepest concerns and grief as well as our greatest joys. We are constantly giving and taking, calling and responding, conspiring. We help each other believe. We help one another keep on. That's what friendship is all about and it is why Augustine calls the church "the company of friends."

Being the company of friends is not because we're all "buddy-buddy" with one another but because it is in life together that we come to know God. Indeed, we cannot know Christ on our own, isolated, by ourselves. It is in the give and take, calling and responding to one another that we learn how to be Christian.

It is why showing up is so essential. We show up for one another. We do not show up based upon whether or not I think I might get something today (although I very likely will). I show up because someone else might need me. One little thing I say, one little gesture, one moment of listening, or one comment might make a big difference in someone else's life. So I show up. I show up so we can breathe together. I show up because the Holy Spirit might very well breathe through me into someone else's life the very life-giving Spirit they need to make it through another week.

Our Scripture reading this morning is from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the little church in Corinth. As in all of his letters, Paul is trying to help a small band of believers, hanging on by their fingernails, to become the church of Jesus Christ. Instead of a gathering of individuals, each on their own spiritual quest, and each into their own spiritual gifts, in which some were considered much more important or much more prestigious, Paul writes to them using the analogy of the body.

There is some rivalry going on in Corinth about who is the most important and who is not, who is the most sophisticated and who is least. Paul begins his letter by turning all of that upside down, reminding them that power and wisdom is defined by the crucified Christ, through whom “God made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1:18-25). In the opening of the letter he indicates his concern about their class divisions. It is precisely this sort of class system of ranking denoted by the “wisdom of the world” and who had the superior spiritual knowledge or gifts that the message of the crucified Christ turned upside-down

Paul tells them that the crucified and resurrected Christ turns everything topsy-turvy so that even how their church is organized is different from the ways of society. The crucified Jesus changes how they relate to each other. They have a new way of dealing with money – by sharing it. They have a new way of dealing with conflict – by forgiveness. They have a new way to deal with suffering – by sharing it together. They have a new way to deal with power relations and hierarchy – by seeing themselves as different members of Christ’s body.

The analogy of being part of a body was nothing new in the ancient world. It was quite common for those with power to remind the lowly parts of the body politic that it was their job to serve the higher parts of the body. But here, Paul turns it around and says, “the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect” (verses 22-23).

Paul is telling the small church in Corinth and the small church in Nacogdoches, that being the church is relational and participatory, in which everyone has a voice and everyone has a stake. The Holy Spirit connects us all to

Christ and each other and we learn to participate by participating. We do not get the magic pill ahead of time that gives us instant enlightenment. We do not get the information, the formula, the equation, or the answer first, and then begin to work it out. No, we live it out first, together, as foot and ankles and knees and hands and elbows figuring out how to walk as we walk. We conspire together.

This passage from Paul to the Corinthians is one of the key places we old radical Baptists receive our understanding of the nature and function of the church. We are all different members of the body of Christ. We are not a corporate business model with a board of directors, shareholders, and management staff. We are not hierarchical with a bishop. We seek to be a body recognizing and supporting each other's gifts. Not everyone is called to be an apostle, not everyone is called to be a teacher, but everyone is called and given some gift for the common good of the body (12:7). In the sharing and giving and taking of gifts, the body does its work empowered and led by the living Christ, the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we're sharing our gifts and serving and sometimes we need to receive the gifts of the body (which is harder for most of us) but for the body to function we must both receive and give. This giving and taking is conspiring together.

What's more is that we learn to see the wider world in terms of each and every person having a gift to offer for the common good and that instead of a society of elites and the rich and powerful we begin to see how I Cor. 12 is a model for how society can function. Each and every one is an equal member of the body and we all work for the common good. This very passage from Paul was a bedrock in our Baptist understanding of the church, but it was also one of the basic texts from which democracy sprang. The Baptists, the Puritans, and others understood society as not hierarchical. It was the body politic. Each person had dignity and

each person has a voice and eventually a vote. It was radical and revolutionary then, and it still is. It shapes how we see and what we hope.

Back in Acts 17, Paul and Silas were preaching and teaching in Thessalonica and had many converts. But others did not like what they were saying and organized a mob searching for them saying, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6).

Well, they’ve come here to Nacogdoches, too.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.