

Being Christ's Body

Ephesians 1:15-23

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 25:31-46

Nov. 23, 2014 Pent. 24A

[image 1] The first church I served after seminary was First Christian Church in Oelwein, Iowa. We moved to Oelwein in February, 1968, and 3 months later, on May 15, 4:53 PM, a tornado ripped through the town, right up Main Street. I remember the exact time, because we were without electricity for about a week, so it was like time had stood still—4:53 by the electric clocks, 24 hours a day. The twister caused such severe damage to the church building that it had to be torn down. I had come to town to preach up a storm, but that was ridiculous.

Months after the tornado, as I would tell people from outside about the storm, and say that the tornado destroyed the church, Sandy would always correct me by adding the word "building." She was right. The tornado didn't destroy the church. It destroyed a building that we all loved and grieved over, a building laden with memories of worship and fun, weddings and funerals, baptisms and prayer vigils. But the church was not destroyed, for like the old Avery and Marsh song goes, "the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people."

[image 2] I love this beautiful building we're worshipping in, and most of you love it more than I do, because you have longer memories about it than I do; precious memories. But this building is not Crossroads Christian Church—you are, together, Crossroads Christian Church. What does that mean? You're a group of people who get along really well, but you're not a social club. You're a group of people who do things to help the community and the world, but you're not a service club. You're a group of people who enjoy getting together to eat, like Sunday after church, Lunch Bunch, and on Wednesday evenings, but that doesn't define who you are, either.

Who are we, then? Or better yet, whose are we? In Ephesians 1:22-23, St. Paul reminds us of the answer. "And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, *which is his body*, the fullness of him who fills all in all." The church—whether it's us here, or any other church in town, or any other church in the whole world—is Christ's body, formed to do the work of Jesus Christ in the world.

[image 3] This is the last Sunday of the Season of Pentecost, and the last Sunday of the Church Year. Next Sunday begins Advent, and we start all over again. Last year at Advent, we prepared our hearts for Christ's coming, and we waited. Christmas came, and we celebrated the birth of

Jesus in Bethlehem, and the birth of Christ in our hearts. In Epiphany, we explored the ways that God revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. Lent was the season of repentance, of following Christ on the road to the cross, of realizing the terrible price that was paid for God's grace, leading right up to Good Friday and the Cross. On Easter we celebrated Christ's resurrection. Pentecost looks back at the life and teachings of Jesus; his parables; his healings. It also tells of how we became the church, how Christ's Spirit took us over, and we became Christ's body, and ever since, in the season of Pentecost, we've been learning more and more about what it means to live as Christians.

This last Sunday of Pentecost is sometimes called Christ the King Sunday, or, if we're not too impressed with kings, or if King makes you think of Elvis, you can call it the Reign of Christ Sunday—that's r-e-i-g-n, reign. In short, it's a time to remember who the boss really is—and this time I don't mean Springsteen. It's a recent holiday on the church calendar, but it has an interesting story. During the 1920's, the world was still traumatized from World War I, and demagogues were becoming dictators all over Europe. They were demanding total allegiance—Hitler in Germany, Stalin in Russia, Mussolini in Italy. "You must follow me, my beliefs, my ways; if not, you are not a true patriot, a true believer, and you will be punished," they said. Pope Pius

decided that Christians needed to be reminded that they follow a different king, a different kind of ruler, Jesus Christ. So he declared the last Sunday of Pentecost as Christ the King Sunday, so that all Christian believers would know that their real king wasn't some cruel earthly dictator who could send you to a concentration camp, but was Jesus Christ, the one who came as a servant among us, to bring us the hope of abundant life, not the threat of death, and to show us the truth of God's grace.

So if Christ is to be our king, or to change the metaphor, if we are to be Christ's body, then we as a church are called to do the things that Christ did—heal, forgive, redeem, restore, save. The Christ who came to be the light of the world calls us to be the light of the world. In Christ's first sermon, he gave his mission statement, borrowed from the prophet Isaiah:

'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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

And that's what he did. Near the very end of his ministry, he gave this utterly scary parable of the sheep and the goats. In it, he said that our relationship with God, our

very salvation, wasn't dependent upon what we believed, or how we were baptized, but how we cared for and helped others—the hungry—the thirsty—the stranger—the naked—the sick—the imprisoned. Why? Because that's what Jesus himself did, and he wants us to keep on doing the same thing. We are not to do our own thing, but we are to do Christ's thing, if we are to be loyal and faithful servants. Our society treats with contempt those who are at the bottom of the heap. If economics is king, that's understandable—we're measured by our net worth. But if Christ is king, everything is different. We care. We visit. We feed. We shelter.

[image 4] Christine Chakoian, a Presbyterian pastor in Lake Forest, Illinois, wrote an article in the *Christian Century* about the parable of the sheep and goats by comparing it to the CBS reality show *Undercover Boss*. In that series, CEOs leave their comfortable corner offices, and go experience life among the worker bees of their corporation. Although they have to explain away the TV crews that accompany them, they find out what it is like to clean sewers, or serve meals, or work the assembly line. Finally, employees gather and see the show, and sometimes they see themselves getting promoted or given rewards for good work, or getting demoted or fired if they've been rude to customers or backbiting.

In the parable, Jesus is the anonymous CEO receiving or not receiving help from Christians.

Chakoian puts it this way. "Yikes! I wonder how Jesus would judge his company at work right now. Corporation, after all, comes from the same Latin root as corpus, as in the body of Christ.

- How well do we as the community of Christ understand our corporation's incentive structure? "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."
- How clear are we about the guidelines for promotion? "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."
- How well do we grasp the company's creed? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, [and] your neighbor as yourself."
- How accurate are we at anticipating the CEO's priorities? "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me."¹

¹ *Christian Century*, November 15, 2011, p. 26.

(unquote).

Her words help remind us that although we think about the sheep and goats as individuals, the story applies to the church and churches as a whole. Our mission is to proclaim the good news of God's love, in words and also in action. When we reach out to help others we are being Jesus Christ for them. We are being Christ's body. And we are realizing that our king, our ruler, our CEO, is not away in the cosmic corner office, but is right there with us, in the faces of the ones, the impoverished, the hungry, the cold, the imprisoned, that we serve. Amen.

(revgalblogpals) Holy God, holy and gracious one
Fill us with a Spirit of Wisdom
Feed us with your justice,
Nurture us with your mercy and grace.

We pray for those who are struggling from
Famine, war, drought, and other causes of hunger,
That deplete humanity, and all the world
Of the bounty of your creation.
Help us God to feed as you do.

In thanksgiving for all the gifts of this life
May we give to those who, for whatever reason
Suffer for lack of food.

Holy God, holy and gracious one
Fill us with a Spirit of Wisdom
Feed us with your justice,
Nurture us with your mercy and grace.

Holy God, help us to see those who suffer
For want of clothing, warmth, safety, shelter,
Help us God, to care as you do.

In thanksgiving for all the gifts of this life
May we tend to those who, for whatever reason
Suffer for lack of clothing and housing.

Holy God, holy and gracious one
Fill us with a Spirit of Wisdom
Feed us with your justice,
Nurture us with your mercy and grace.

Holy God, seeker of the lost,
Help us to find you, see you, know you.

Holy God, bind up the injured,
these we carry in our hearts,

Those in need of your healing.
And, help us to be your hands,
Your compassion, your healing
Love, in all we do.

Holy God, holy and gracious one
Fill us with a Spirit of Wisdom
Feed us with your justice,
Nurture us with your mercy and grace.
Amen.

Communion: In Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Orthodox, and other highly liturgical churches, the Lord's Supper is often called the Eucharist. Eucharist comes from a Greek word meaning Thanksgiving. One of my seminary professors, Keith Watkins, whose daughter is now General Minister and President of the Disciples, wrote a book about communion and called it *The Great Thanksgiving*. In it, he showed how even for us less liturgical folks, the Eucharist, communion, was at the heart of our worship. When the church gathers at the communion table, we give thanks for God's wonderful gift of Jesus Christ. We give thanks for the bread and the wine, and what they represent. We give thanks for the great things that God has done. So on this Sunday before Thanksgiving, we say to God and to Jesus, thank you, God, thank you, thank you. Amen.