

Sunday, October 12, 2014

What Do You Want Out of Church? Comfort?: Being the Body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 10: 16-17; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27; Romans 7: 4-6; Romans 8: 10-17

We are beginning a new focus for the next four weeks

– as we continue our Fall focus of *Walking with Jesus*.

Over the next four weeks, we are asking the question: *What Do You Want Out of Church?*

Maybe you have not given that much conscious thought

– and then maybe you have

– though innately, I think we all ask ourselves this question

– What do I want out of church?

And even though we may not be able to name specifically what we want

– **we have a sense we are not getting out of church what we want.**

And so over the next four weeks you are being invited to think on this question:

**What do you want out of church?**

We will be looking at four primary images of the church in the New Testament

– though, according to Paul Minear in *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, there are over 90 images of the church expressed within its pages.

Church as

- Body of Christ,
- People of God,
- Fellowship of Faith, and
- New Creation

One thing that people, not only at NSMC, but across North America, seek out in a church is comfort

– the church to be a place where we can come with our hurts, our struggles and not be alone

– and in doing so, we hope to find comfort and strength.

**Is that what the church is to be?**

To begin to address this understanding of church as a place of comfort, we begin today with exploring the image of the church as the Body of Christ.

Minear expresses that there are 11 images in the New Testament that relate to regarding the church as the Body of Christ:

- the body of life,
- members of Christ,
- the body and the blood,
- the diversities of ministries,
- spiritual body,
- head of cosmic spirits,
- head of the church,
- the body of this head,
- the unity of Jews and Gentiles,

- the growth of the body, and
- the fullness of God.

He further expresses, in light of all these images:

“the phrase, ‘the body of Christ’ is not a single expression with an unchanging meaning.

Paul’s thought remains extremely flexible and elastic. Here the term ‘body’ has one meaning; there it has quite another. Here the term ‘members’ signifies one thing, there another.

Rarely can all the nuances of a word be systematically organized into a single pattern.

In some passages the church is explicitly identified with Christ’s body, but in other passages this identification becomes very tenuous indeed.

The variety of usage should warn us against seeking to produce a single inclusive definition of the image, and against importing into each occurrence of the analogy the range of meanings which it bears in other passages” (Minear, pp. 173-174).

**So, this morning, rather than giving a lecture on definitions, I want for us to focus more on the church as ‘body of Christ’ as metaphor, as parable, as it relates to being a place of comfort.**

In one sense – yes – we are to be a place of comfort.

Jesus in Matthew 11 invites all who are weary and burdened to come to him.

The church is the place to come if you are hurting – comfort is given as we walk with one another through the struggles of life.

Yet, in another sense, the body of Christ can be a very uncomfortable place.

A brief exploration of the passages that were read this morning reveal that there is meant to be much diversity in the body of Christ

- and fostering diversity is hard work.

This past weekend met with someone working in Rockford who is attempting to get white churches together with black churches – fostering such diversity is indeed hard work.

In fact, if you take a look at the majority of churches in North America, opting for diversity has not been high on our list of identifiers.

It was, I believe, Martin Luther King, Jr., who expressed, “it is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.”

For the most part, the church in America has opted for the comfort of being the same, of uniformity – rather than being open to the comfort the Spirit offers through being the diverse body of Christ.

Diversity in the body of Christ comes in many forms:

We are diverse members

- which includes our personalities,
- our socioeconomic standing,
- our levels of education,
- our genders,

- our backgrounds and life experiences,
- our race and ethnicities,
- our nationalities,
- our theological understandings,
- our worldviews,
- our orientations.

With all this diversity, the body of Christ can be a pretty uncomfortable place  
 – if we understand church as being a place of comfort by sameness, or others being like me.

Can the church be a place of comfort if we are all so different from one another – or is sameness or uniformity a requisite for comfort, for unity?

I think we need to come to a different understanding of comfort  
 – because God has always intended diversity.

From the very beginning – in creation,

God’s creation is full of diversity: plants and animals of all kinds, human beings created as male and female.

And yet, our tendency as human beings has always to rebel against this diversity  
 – seeking to find meaning, comfort in our uniformity.

Rather than working together or taking responsibility for actions, we blamed one another – as Adam blamed Eve for eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil;

Or, we thought that in being the same, we could make a name for ourselves and be equal with God  
 – so we were scattered by God in the confusion of our languages at Babel.

And even on the day of Pentecost, in which the church was birthed, we sought to remain in Jerusalem living in the glorious moment of being the people of God filled with God’s Spirit  
 – but God scattered us to the ends of the earth so that we might reveal and give witness to the actions of God throughout the world.

It seems, our tendency as broken human beings is towards sameness, rather than diversity  
 – but the comfort we find in sameness is a comfort of our own doing, **and I believe, a false comfort**  
 – it is not the comfort we find in being reconciled with God through Christ.

Comfort is a gift given us by the Spirit of God, as we learn to live together as the Body of Christ, in all our diversity.

“For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body  
 – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free  
 – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.”

The focus that the Body of Christ is not about Jew or Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female  
 – is not about uniformity, but rather that we find our common ground in Christ.  
 – meaning, no divisions are to separate us when we are in Christ

Christ, the Spirit of Christ, is the one who holds us together in light of all our diversity.

In this way, in the midst of our diversity, Christ alone is our comfort.

For it seems that the Spirit of God can only fully exist in the presence of diversity  
– being the One who holds all things together  
– even in relation to the diversity of our gifts.

“Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.

All of these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.”

As Paul writes to the Romans, we are filled with life when we are filled with the Spirit of Christ. Our tendency to opt for sameness hinders the living Spirit within us  
– and yet, **we are incapable** of holding ourselves together in our diversity, in our differences  
– **being held together in our diversity is wholly and solely the work of the Spirit of Christ in us and through us.**

And so, I say again:  
Comfort is not to be found in having all the same around us – that is a false comfort.

Comfort is to be found as we are together with one another in all our diversity, in all our differences, in all our failings and successes  
– **as we are held together by the One Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ.**

Our comfort in being the Body of Christ  
– is the work of the Spirit in us.

So this morning, I extend to you a challenge and an invitation  
– open wide your life to the work of the Spirit in you.

See one another through the Spirit of Christ  
– rather than through our own perceptions, our own points of view,  
– make space for one another who are filled with the Spirit of Christ, and  
– **as we yield ourselves to Christ’s Spirit in this openness, may we be made one with another, and find comfort in being together with one another as the Body of Christ.**

Comfort is a gift given us as we participate together in Christ  
– the blood of Christ and the body of Christ

God intends for the table of the Lord to be a diverse place  
– and, so as you come to the table,  
– receive Christ’s invitation,  
– not looking at one another as to how alike we are,  
– but come recognizing and being amazed that in Jesus, in the Spirit, all of us who are different from one another in so many ways,  
– are the same Body of Christ,  
– held together by Christ’s Spirit.

So come, be comforted

- take and eat of the bread
- take and drink of the cup

And discover our oneness not in the sameness of our lives,

But in the Oneness of the One, whose Body we are

– **Christ and Christ's Spirit alone is the One who holds us together.**