

I began my last congregational call in 2016, March to be exact. Take a moment and try to remember what the world was like in 2016. I know, it's pre-COVID so everything starts to blur a little. What do you remember about what was happening 8-9 years ago? Maybe it bears some similarity to the news headlines of today? I've come to realize I don't have the best timing when it comes to being in a new community of faith while major political shifts are happening all around us.

I vividly recall what it felt like to preach, with the call committee in attendance at an interim call, the Sunday after candidate Trump claimed that we should register Muslims in this country... and I denounced his statements as akin to the registration of Jews in Nazi Germany. I recall what it felt like eight months later when I preached the Sunday following the election of President Trump when the gospel text was Luke's Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the excluded." And all across the lectionary-following world, preachers were accused of being divisive and partisan for preaching the words of Jesus.

And here I stand today, preaching my **eighth** sermon to you all – counting Xmas Eve – and I'm trying to figure out what to do with the texts at hand and the happenings in the world around us. How much do I say – when I've only barely begun to learn your names, let alone your stories? How much do you want to hear about my take on the state of our country and our collective struggle between living in the Kingdom of God and in an unbelievably divided "United" States of America?

And I realize I can't hide behind the newness of our relationship when I see the disconnect between the words of Jesus and Paul – and the words spoken today. I can't hide behind a fear of rocking the boat when people are being deliberately and maliciously dumped over the side.

I can't hide, because I stand in front of you with just about every privilege this country offers. I'm a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, Christian man. The only privilege I might not be able to claim is having a full-head of hair – and I'm not sure that holds a whole lot of consequences. Acknowledging privilege doesn't claim that life is always easy, but there is nothing arbitrarily standing in my way – like the color of my skin.

And I can't hide from what the scriptures tell us over and over again about our communal life. There is no ambiguity in Jesus' first sermon. It's unbelievably short. When you are the living Word of God, it takes very few words to get the message across. Jesus

reads from the prophetic words of Isaiah and tells his gathered audience that those words are fulfilled in their hearing them from him. Those words...that proclaimed, “release to the captives...sight to the blind...” freedom to the oppressed, and “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Make no mistake about that last one, “the year of the Lord’s favor” wasn’t some vague promise of God’s love in some unknown fashion. Jesus was invoking the law of jubilee – part of the Torah that may never have actually been practiced – it was the part of Jewish **law** that said all debt was cancelled and land returned to those it had been taken from every 50 years. The financial playing field was leveled – for the good of the whole community.

Jesus invokes the words of Isaiah to make a radical claim about the inclusive, unifying, **merciful** love of God to a people who were not inclusive, unifying, merciful, or loving – or at least not all the time. They needed to hear this message and then they turned away from it and ran Jesus out of town. Perhaps they were some of the same people who would later denounce Jesus before the occupying authorities and call for his crucifixion. His radical proclamation of God’s mercy was soundly rejected.

It's a painful reality that people are confronted over and over again with the truth of a grace-filled God and they...we...routinely and without hard-fought exceptions, turn away from that grace and inclusivity to stake a claim for our own tribe and way of life as absolutely right and inviolable.

When confronted with the truth of the gospel, we almost can’t help ourselves as we turn it to our own advantage and try to exclude people from it. It doesn’t apply to **those** people. Surely God doesn’t include **them** in the kingdom. Surely **they** don’t deserve to be loved.

Well, no they don’t...but then neither do you. Neither do I. That’s the whole point of grace.

Which brings us to Paul’s description of the Body of Christ. Some of you thought I got distracted already from my plan to preach on 1st Corinthians. I hadn’t forgotten. In fact, my whole take on the events of the week has been framed by this analogy that Paul gives us. I’ve been wrestling with what it means to truly embrace this reality of a **body** when it seems like everything is being dismembered.

Last week, Paul lifted up the diversity of gifts given by the spirit with the understanding that those gifts worked together in their diversity to create the common good. We embrace

the idea that everyone contributes something a little bit different to the community so that we're stronger together than we are individually.

This week, Paul pushes that analogy as far as you can possibly imagine. And probably just a little beyond what we can imagine. It's not just about being a well-oiled machine where we take what's offered from each individual cog to produce what the community needs.

We are now inextricably enmeshed to be dependent on one another, to support one another, to **live** for one another. It's not that our individuality is gone, but we are now defined not as an individual, but as a collective organism that eats, breaths, and moves together – or it fails.

Now take that image of who we are – as children of God and described as the Body of Christ by Paul – and overlay that with the politics of today. Take this image of a body that is most dependent on its **least** honorable and respectable bits – and make no mistake about what Paul is implying in that image. Got it? Don't make me say it.

Take this beautifully crafted organism that is centered in the parts that aren't considered important, centered in God's loving grace and consider what you've heard about how we're going to treat people who seem different, who are **claimed** to be less honorable. Imagine that we're now taking that body and carving it up so that pieces can be discarded.

You might think that Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs are flawed...and they probably are because nothing we do is perfect, but that doesn't mean people who are different from the white, cis-gendered, heterosexual "standard" aren't part of the body. **Because they are.** And no law, executive order, or social media tantrum can exclude them from the Body of Christ or the Kingdom of God. Ever. And they shouldn't be excluded from the common good either.

I've said far more words than Jesus. I've said words that aren't new or more meaningful than many other preachers who have taken much bigger risks in saying them than I have today. And if you agree with me or not, you may be wondering about the "so what?" What do we do with this image of the Body of Christ and the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the here and now?

I don't know. But, together, as the Body of Christ, we're going to figure it out. Amen.