

Second Sunday after Epiphany January 14 2024

**1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; 1 Corinthians
6:12-20**

Last week, we learned that in baptism, we are given an identity. One that shapes everything else in our lives. Beloved child of God. Chosen by God. Gifted by God with the Holy Spirit- which comes down on us through those waters of baptism the same way she did for Jesus at his baptism. We reflected on what this means for us and for our lives. Which is good.

And yet.

Baptism, faith, following Jesus is not just about us, an individual task. Because that baptism not only gives us that individual identity of child of God, it also incorporates us into the body of Christ that is the church. As Paul writes in our reading from 1 Corinthians, “our bodies are members of Christ.” In chapter 12 he writes, “Now ya’ll are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it.”

Through our baptism we are intimately tied not only to Jesus, but to one another. In the same way fingers are connected to one another, or the leg and the arm.

Christianity is not about me and God. At least not me and God alone. It is about my relationship with God, with my fellow believers, and with the world. It is about my place in communion with fellow believers and in community with all.

I wonder if this is not why Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.” Because where Christ shows up is in relationship. In

relationship with others is where who we are as followers of Jesus is most fully expressed.

We, especially in the West, are all about the individual. It is about my faith, what I believe, how it affects me. This tends to lead us to pull away from community- because living in relationship with others is hard.

Jesus was always other focused. How does this affect others. How does this affect my community... the whole community. And that is what he calls us to. Because we are members of one another. We are not our own.

You hear these themes in our texts today.

Paul is quoting back slogans of those who are stirring the pot in the church in the city of Corinth. "All things are lawful for me." A slogan that acknowledges the freedom that comes in Christ. But Paul reminds them, yes... but not all things combine in ways that bring benefit. The opponents were acting as if their body was their own. That what they did to/with it didn't affect anyone else. But that freedom was damaging not only their body. But the body of Christ that is the community of believers. The church.

Paul reminds them- do you not know that your body is a member of Christ? Do you not know that anyone united to the Lord through baptism becomes one spirit with him? Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price. That of Jesus' death on the cross. So, you are no longer just your own. You belong- to God and to your neighbor.

This is an echo of the beginning of Acts, where it is no longer the Temple in Jerusalem that is the seat of God, but that seat is within the bodies of the followers of Jesus. We are the Body of Christ, we- ya'll- are the Temple. God does not just look at our soul and call it good. God calls this physical flesh good. God resurrects not just our soul, but all that is us.

So, Paul says, use this body for a holy purpose. Because it is not just your own, but God's. It is not just your own but affects and changes all those other bodies around you. You are wholly significant.

Our western conception of the self is radically individual. We believe that we owe nothing to anyone. That I can do whatever I want with "my" body. To an extent, that is true. But, in both human terms and God's terms, we are not our own.

Because we are individually members of the body of Christ, how you treat your body affects those who love you. Friends, family, teachers, coworkers. Those who you don't even know but who look upon you with favor. How many of us have looked at a loved one who is not caring for their body well and have it weigh upon us? They smoke, they drink, they take drugs. They don't attend to exercise of their diet in a way that is conducive to long and healthy living.

We are not our own- how many of us have cared for those who are sick, or can no longer move on their own? Or had someone have to do that for us? That caring affects us and our families. It changes who we are and what we do. This also clearly shows the lie that we are our own. In the end, we need one another to live.

We are not our own. We are part of a community. So that we feel it when one of our own is hospitalized, dies, gets sick. It affects us all. And so, we care for our bodies, temples of the Holy Spirit, vital parts/members of the whole Body of Christ. And we attend to those other members who are hurting. In this communion of the Body of Christ.

It also means we see that interconnectivity in the larger society around us. How the poverty of our neighbor does concern us. How their inability to live safely does concern us. How their being unhoused does concern us. Because we understand that when one member of the community does not have daily bread, it diminishes... it wounds all of us.

We are reminded in the Psalm of God's intimate connection with our bodies. The Psalmist reminds us that God hems us in, behind and before. That there is nowhere we can go that God is not. God has knit us together, knows our innermost thoughts. When we ponder this wondrous truth, we can exclaim with the Psalmist that we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

As a postmodern people, and especially in the younger generations, We are mistrustful of this community. Of this institution that is the church. And, as our text from 1 Samuel shows us. And as the news reports remind us. There is every reason to be skeptical about it.

For us, it is reports of sexual or spiritual abuse. It is reports of fraud or toxic cultures. Signs of the reality that this body of Christ that is the church is made of humans who are still in bondage to sin.

In 1 Samuel it is the fact that the word of the Lord is rare in those days and visions are not widespread. The author makes clear that the old religion of Eli is coming to a close. The fruit, the signs of a vital faith – that the word of the Lord is abundant, visions of the kingdom are widespread- these have withered. The leadership of Eli and the priests who serve him (including his sons) no longer serve God, so... God does what God does in these situations and God does a new thing.

Samuel, a child, is that new voice. Called by God.

We hear this with our post modern ears and celebrate. See God chucks out the old and stale in favor of the new. New is always better!

But... something is still present in the old that we can learn from. That is necessary for the new to blossom.

Because while it takes Eli some time, because he has experienced it himself, he finally figures out that God is calling Samuel and guides his pupil to the way to respond. Without Eli- Samuel is still clueless. He doesn't know what God's voice sounds like- which is both condemnation of Eli and why he needs Eli. Without the old ways, Samuel doesn't know what is going on. He misunderstands. Which is also dangerous.

And. For all his faults that God enumerates to Samuel. Eli shows Samuel true trust in God. Eli demands to hear what God has told Samuel. And when he learns that because of his own acts and that of his sons God will cut them off, will move on from them. Eli does not rail against an unfair God. Does not accuse God of being fickle. No, he trusts, even now, that God's way is what is best. "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him."

What faith there is in that phrase. A trust that even when things aren't going your way... God's judgment is best. An understanding that truth lies not in Eli and the Temple, but in God. And where those two things don't overlap... God wins.

What we forget with our modern sensibilities, is that Samuel is not called to destroy the community and set everyone on their own. Rather, he is called to reform the community. To call it from its stagnation and ambivalence to greater faithfulness.

To remind them of their connection to God and to one another and what that can mean for the benefit of everyone.

This is why this assembly with fellow believers- in the flesh- is so vital for who we are. This is why finding a place in this communion of believers to share the unique gifts God has given you is so important. Because not only do we need those gifts to do the ministry God has given us- but you need that connection for your own faith.

This is the fullness of what communion means. It refers not only to the benefits of this Meal of Christ's body and blood coming to us in bread and wine. It also refers to the communion of being present with one another, eating a meal together, intertwining our lives to love, support, correct, and cheer one another.

So, my baptized children of God. Let us give thanks for this beloved, imperfect, always changing communion that is the church. Let us listen together for where God is calling us as individuals and as a community. And let us speak together the words of Samuel. "Speak Lord, for your servants are listening."