

## THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 27, 2023

ISAIAH 51:1-6 | PSALM 138 | ROMANS 12:1-8 | MATTHEW 16:13-20

Back when I was in the ordination process, I had to spend a correctional year at a Lutheran seminary. One of my professors there was this woman named Dr. Farag. And Dr. Farag was a little unusual because while most of the faculty were Lutheran with a handful of mainline Protestants here and there, Dr. Farag was part of the Orthodox Coptic Church. If you're unfamiliar, Coptic Christians are from Egypt, and they broke off from other Christians around the fifth century for reasons that we don't really need to get into right now.<sup>1</sup>

But one afternoon, we were getting very much into those reasons. And maybe because it was this seminar was right after lunch and the classroom was a little too warm and we were pretty in the weeds, I was struggling to keep up. And then Dr. Farag said something that lodged itself deep in my brain. *From our perspective, something that only exists in theory doesn't exist at all.* Something that only exists in theory doesn't exist at all.

She was making a point about doctrine, but the same is true for life in general. If you try to eat a theoretical lunch, fill your car with theoretical gas, and pay your taxes with a theoretical check, you are going to get hungry, get stranded, and get a letter from the IRS. For something to make a difference in the world, it has to be tangible, experienced, and embodied. Something that only exists in theory doesn't exist at all.

That's exactly what today's reading from Romans is about. As we've heard from this letter this summer, St. Paul has been writing about what often seems like very abstract theology. But whenever we think maybe this is going to get too theoretical to make any difference to our actual lives, he brings it right back down to earth. He does exactly the same thing this week. He follows up a long and lofty discussion of God's inclusive, boundary-breaking, reconciling love with this: "We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." We are the body of Christ.

Think of all the other images that he could have opted for here. He could have gone for "the society of Christ." Or the "community of Christ." Or the "fellowship of Christ." But the image he reaches for again and again is the "body of Christ."

That body metaphor is powerful because it applies in all different kinds of ways. The one Paul talks about in today's reading has to do with gifts. Bodies are made up of different parts that do different things. And the church is the same. There's a reason why I am in the pulpit and not at the piano. Another is that bodies change over time. People look different at five and fifteen and fifty. And so do our churches. Some of you have been to St. John in Passaic which started as a church of German immigrants and is now primarily a church of Central American immigrants. The body shifts over time. And another one—this is the one that we'll come back to—is that bodies take up space. You can fill a subway car with an

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<sup>1</sup> Doing this from memory so double check this, but if you want to get into the weeds, the Coptic Church rejected the Council of Chalcedon, which claimed Christ's divine and human natures (*ousia*) were united in his person (*stasis*). The Coptic tradition, sometimes described as Miaphysite, held that the union occurred in Christ's natures so that Christ had one nature. The contention was basically that a nature can't exist outside of a being (ie, we have no idea what "catness" is unless we've seen a cat.)

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infinite number of societies and fellowships and communities. But it can only hold a certain number of bodies. A body has a real physical presence. And as the church—the people assembled around word and sacrament—so do we.

So you can see why Paul liked that image. And, as it turns out, lots of other people liked it, too. People in St. Paul's world talked about groups of people as "bodies" quite a lot. When writers like Plato, Plutarch, or the stoics wanted their audience to work together, they might encourage them to think of themselves not as individuals but as a body.<sup>2</sup>

But there was something unique that Paul did use that metaphor. Everybody else used this "body" image in general. In theory. "Consider yourselves as a body," they would say. "Could be any body. Doesn't matter. Just the first body that comes to mind." But for Paul, we are not just *any* body. We are the body of Christ.

That makes all the difference. Because just as Jesus incarnated and enacted the design of God's great love in the world, we make real and tangible for our neighbors Christ's unceasing love and inclusive spirit. So that even if Jesus is no longer present for us the way he was to his disciples, his mission still has a physical presence in the world.

That's exactly what today's gospel reading is about. After Peter confesses that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of the Living God, Jesus says that he will give Peter the keys to the kingdom. And Jesus says that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Jesus gives Peter the authority to continue his mission and ministry. So that it won't end after his crucifixion and resurrection, but it will continue to be embodied in a new way. And in our baptisms, we receive those same keys, that same authority, that same mission to love and serve God's creation.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit that enlivens our shared ministry, Jesus is made real in the lives of our neighbors.

There's a hymn that we've been using a lot lately that gets this idea exactly right. It's from our new hymn supplement *All Creation Sings* and it's by Anne Krenz Organ. (Great name for a church musician.) It's called "This is Christ's Body." It goes, "This is Christ's body, broken and blest. Feed us with mercy and love. We are Christ's body, broken and blest. Heal us and make us one." If all you knew about communion were the words to that hymn, that would pretty good. At this table, Christ is physically present for us so that we can make Christ's compassion, inclusion, and justice physically present in the lives of our neighbors.

After all, something that only exists in theory doesn't exist at all. But thanks to the gift of the Spirit, Christ's redeeming and reconciling work is always at hand.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>2</sup> See the last chapter of Paula Gooder, *Body: Biblical Spirituality for the Whole Person* (London: SPCK, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Timothy J. Wengert, *The Annotated Luther, Volume 1: The Roots of Reform* (Fortress Press, 2015), 195. Also referenced in the Smalcald Articles p. 319 in the Kolb/Wengert Book of Concord.

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