

“One Body, Many Members”

The Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville

Sunday, January 27, 2019

1 CORINTHIANS 12.12-31A

Beyond being in the same class at Shermer High School in Shermer, Illinois, Claire Standish, Andrew Clark, John Bender, Brian Johnson, and Allison Reynolds have little in common. And with the exception of Claire and Andrew, they do not associate with each other in school.

In the simplest terms—their own terms—Claire is a princess, Andrew an athlete, Bender a criminal, Brian a brain, and Allison is a basket case. But the one thing they do have in common is a nine-hour detention in the school library together on Saturday, March 24, 1984 under the supervision of the disciplinary principal, Mr. Vernon.

At this point I’m sure, you’ve caught on. This is the synopsis of the 80’s classic movie: *The Breakfast Club*.

As the plot goes, during their time in detention, each is required to write a minimum 1,000 word essay responding to the question: “Who do you think you are?”

At the start of their detention, they most likely would have responded to this question—if they would have responded to it at all—with something close to the terms which they’ve already been defined by; this is the way the world sees them and the way they’ve been told to see themselves.

Somewhere in the middle of the movie, Mr. Vernon opens up to Carl the janitor and admits his fear and frustration, stating that he's been in education for many years and the kids haven't changed. They're still defiant, arrogant, and disrespectful toward authority.

Janitor Carl, in all his wisdom, tells Mr. Vernon that he is wrong. Carl tells him that it's his own attitude toward the students that has soured his perspective. For that reason, the students will always be seen the way that Mr. Vernon described them.

As the movie continues, we learn more about the complexities of each of these students; some of their more hidden traits begin to emerge. Claire, for example is a natural leader. Bender begins to let his guard down and softens toward the others. And Brian realizes that he's actually a pretty good writer.

At Claire's request and with the consensus of the group, Brian agrees to write the essay they were assigned on behalf of the entire group which challenges Mr. Vernon and his preconceived judgments about them. Rather than answering the assigned question, he writes a motivating letter which is essentially the main point of the whole story and signs it "The Breakfast Club" and leaves it on the table for Mr. Vernon to read.

The People's Preparation this morning is a transcript of that letter which is read at the very end of the movie:

"Dear Mr. Vernon,
We accept the fact that we had to sacrifice a whole Saturday in detention for whatever it was we did wrong, but we think you're crazy to make us

write an essay telling you who we think we are. You see us as you want to see us... In the simplest terms and the most convenient definitions. But what we found out is that each one of us is a brain, and an athlete, and a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Does that answer your question?

Sincerely yours,
The Breakfast Club”

Aside from its great one-liners, what makes this a classic movie is its profound commentary on our nature as human beings to seek to define people, in the simplest and the most convenient terms we can manage—Christians and the Church not withstanding.

To that end, I think sometimes we misuse Paul’s analogy of the body of Christ to attempt to define ourselves and one another; as if Paul’s main point in referring to the “body of Christ” was to provide us with a list of roles to fill followed by the exhortation for the ear to be content as an ear, the eye an eye, and the feet as the feet.

But, if we take our 80’s cult movie classics seriously, I think, as the Breakfast Club suggests, we as human beings, are more complicated than that, and I think Paul’s message is more profound than that.

The implications for the church are important: God has arranged the body—the Church—as an interdependent organism in which diversity is essential.

As the church, I think we get that. There’s a sermon there that we’ve all heard. There isn’t one of us here who is more important to PCOL than

another—no one is dispensable. In fact, it's our diversity which directs our attention to the fullness and richness of God and what it means to be created in God's image.

But here's where I'd like to explore this text a little further and I hope you'll humor me in this. What if Paul's not just talking about the church? What if Paul's designation of the body of Christ is referring to something else?

Now I realize that Paul's letter is written specifically to a congregation regarding certain issues that have become divisive—in the case of our text, the issue is spiritual gifts. But, is it possible read this text in such a way that moves beyond "the one thing" to something that broadens our perspective and challenges our faith?

Broadly speaking, Paul's letter to the Corinthians is a passionate and reasoned call to understand the faith they—and we—profess. To that end, what if Paul is talking about something with this analogy that transcends the church, what if its that thing that allows us to be the church in the first place?

As I re-read this passage several times, the conclusion of verse 12 struck me as interesting. "For just as the body is one and has many members, ... so it is with Christ." If the "body of Christ" were simply a metaphor for the church, wouldn't we expect Paul to say, "so it is with *the church*."

By identifying the many members—you and me—directly with Christ, Paul seems to press beyond mere analogy to making an ontological connection between us and Christ, both individually and collectively.

Without any mention of the church, Paul makes clear that individually, we are in Christ and collectively, we are the body of Christ—and ultimately, that has implications for how we understand what it means to be the church.

I think it is important to note that scholars have debated—for a long time—whether, for Paul, this designation as “the body of Christ” is simply a metaphor or a metaphysical reality.

Certainly, “body of Christ” is a metaphor, but just as certainly, I think Paul believes that this metaphor reveals the truth about our union and participation with Christ. Its a nod to the fact that God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit is doing something profound on our behalf.

What Paul calls “the body of Christ,” is not merely a human organization (or even a church, necessarily); but rather, it is a *new reality* brought into being by the activity of the Holy Spirit, which binds all believers into a living union with the crucified and risen Lord.

Verse 13 makes this clear. Paul recalls for the Corinthians the basis for their unity in the one body. “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” It’s not the Spirit who baptizes, but its into the Spirit which we are immersed.

The result is that all have been made one; that all have been plunged into this new world of Spirit-experience. We, with the Corinthians, are bound to one another by the Holy Spirit; we are connected to one another—not just those of us in this room, but we are also connected with those beyond these walls as well. We are connected, Paul reminds us, so that we might

have the same care for one another. “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

To say it another way: We are not “many” like “many stones in a box,” for example, but we are “organically related.” The pain one experiences is experienced by the others. We form a kind of ecology of suffering and rejoicing.

Here’s the point: perhaps “the body of Christ,” then, is a vivid expression of Paul’s conviction that each one of us, by virtue of God’s grace and the Holy Spirit, has been called to play a concrete role in God’s act of reconciliation and redemption for all of creation.

In some ways, I think this is the vision behind the Community Well and ultimately our Capital Campaign—an awareness that we are connected to one another beyond these walls. And its a connection that motivates us to love and serve one another, to build one another up.

For example, just last Thursday, I participated in a meeting that we hosted here at the church on behalf of the New Directions Center—our counseling center here at PCOL—with various mental health professionals, non-profit organizations, and representatives from the school district.

We met to discuss pressing mental health issues faced by our community particularly anxiety, depression, and suicide among adolescents, but also the need to strengthen families and support teachers. Though our motivations may have been different, our goals were the same.

There was an acute awareness among us that when one part of our community suffers, we all suffer with it. There was an acute awareness among us that each one of us was capable of offering *something*, but that, ultimately, we are better together.

If we could indeed come together, to be “better together”—not just as a church, but all of creation as God’s beloved—then perhaps we might be able to find and extend belonging to one another, while retaining our individual dignity and diversity.

Rather than having our vision restricted by categories and presuppositions, perhaps we, like the Breakfast Club, might be able to enrich our lives as a community that recognizes and celebrates the many different ways God has made us human beings, created in the image of God and full of beauty. And to celebrate our connectedness through the Holy Spirit.

Now you are the body of Christ. You are the body of Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.