

## “Real People”

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

There I was again, praying my irritable prayer. “God, make the church a little more loving. Mrs. Schmidt is fussing about not being visited enough. Larry is uptight over money or our lack of it. Mr. Conservative himself, you know who I mean, practically threw a fit as he critiqued my ‘liberal’ sermon. That was liberal? He has no idea. Then there’s the handful of church ladies that Dana Carvey portrayed so well. What’s wrong with these people? You made them; you fix them! You understand, don’t you? Give me patience Lord, and make me more loving. Amen”

Does this sound familiar? Have you ever been exasperated by this strange bunch around you in this community called the church? But even if you quit coming to church, you can’t avoid people even though some folks try it. Give me that old time religion Lord, but no people! Give me spiritual experiences, but no messy people.

When I stop talking and stop praying my embarrassing prayer and listen – then I hear God saying: “They came from the font, from the same waters of baptism that washed you. And by the way have you noticed that you are not always so sweet-smelling yourself?” I hear that when I listen. God loves real

people – impatient, irritable, politically incorrect people. God loves real people.

The wide river of the water of baptism carries us downstream into the heart of God’s love for the world. God created this world, beautiful and battered as it is and he is not abandoning it. When God sent his Son into this creation, it became very personal for him. God loves his creation when he walks and talks, cries and laughs, and even suffers and dies with us. God does this not to fix us but to love us as real people and ultimately to gift us with life eternal.

The love of real people is difficult. I remember our youth minister in a former congregation being all excited because one of the mothers of the youth had volunteered to accompany the group to a national youth gathering. Our youth director told me with great enthusiasm how this mom had told her how much she loved spending time with teenagers. When they returned from their journey to Texas, and I asked how it went, she told me it was a great experience for everyone except for this mother. She told me, “I discovered that when she said she loved teenagers, she meant her own teenager. She thought the rest were too boisterous, too messy, too loud, too out of control.” This mom had a problem with real teenagers.

Occasionally, I receive a request to baptize a child at a time other than a worship service. Except in rare, emergency circumstances, I say “no.” Why?

Because the fullness of baptism requires the presence of real people. It will be a baptism with the presence of the congregation, real people that God chooses, not we. Those people will include more variety, sizes, shapes, opinions, and convictions than we are comfortable with – which is exactly what God wants.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we learn the church is the body of Christ, the gathered community of Jesus, all with different and necessary gifts to share, to build up God's creation, and not ours. Listen to 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 . . . <sup>12</sup>For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup>For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. <sup>14</sup>Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup>If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup>And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup>If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? <sup>18</sup>But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup>If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup>As it is, there are many members, yet one body. <sup>21</sup>The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of

you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup>On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup>and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; <sup>24</sup>whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, <sup>25</sup>that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup>If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

God calls us to love his church, the body of Christ, to share our gifts to build up the gathered community of Jesus which is God's creation and not ours. We don't have to like the church, but God calls us to love it as we love Jesus himself. That can be fun and it can be painful. But it's real, the real world of real people in which God works.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that Christ apart from the congregation is unthinkable. He said the pursuit of sanctification apart from the church is to declare ourselves holy on our own. To grow, we need the church of real people to love. We need those "hypocrites" who know they need forgiveness – real people, all of them.

A pastor was intensely engaged in conversation with a woman, trying to convince her to give his church a try. “You wouldn’t be asking me,” she dared him, “if you really knew me.” The pastor was persistent in his invitation. “Well, try this on for size, and then tell me if I’m welcome. Every Wednesday night I commit adultery with a married man. I’ve tried to call it off, but I can’t. I keep going back to him even though I know it’s wrong. So, that’s me. Is your invitation still open?”

A real person. How do you think the pastor answered her?

God’s amazing love welcomes real people into the community of faith called the church. It’s always amazing to me because God’s love is always so much larger than I can manage. But if God’s love were no greater than mine or yours, the church wouldn’t be much – just a reflection of us.

Instead God loves all of us not only because he created us, but he knows our sin, pain, and brokenness in ways that we only get glimpses of from time to time. God welcomes all of us in the water’s of baptism and keeps washing us with mercy and forgiveness. In God’s amazing grace we keep learning and growing. God’s acceptance of all “real people” in the church means there’s always room for you and me and all of our gifts that we offer to grow the body of Christ. To that I

say, “Amen!”

May the peace of God . . .

Let’s turn to page 87 in the ELW and pray together St. Francis’ prayer . . .

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

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