

The Body of Christ, Broken

It is good to be back in this place. My Sabbatical was wonderful and I have a million stories and you'll probably hear them all over the next weeks. But as much fun as I had and as much as I learned and as much as I loved the opportunity to travel and worship and think and rest, I am truly glad to be back with you all and to resume my duties as your pastor. I've had a lot of conversations in the last couple of weeks about how I feel about coming back to work and I've made a few jokes about missing my afternoon naps and so forth but I think I've astonished a few folks with how eager I am to be back here doing what you all called me to do almost seven years ago. In fact, if memory serves, it was almost exactly seven years ago that Charlie Scalise revealed to me in an e-mail exchange that you all were looking for a pastor, so the end of my Sabbath rest comes at a very apt time. Thanks to your faithfulness to your call to provide appropriate times of rest for your pastor, I am refreshed and ready for another seven years' work among you. I look forward to exploring new ideas for our ministry together and welcoming new believers to join us in our journey. I'm excited about what God has in store for us together.

One of the reasons that I am so glad to be back is that I missed you all. As long as I can remember, I've heard and used the metaphor of the local congregation as a family. Sometimes, this image has mostly been useful to explain the occasional weird uncle or reprobate cousin in the family but, at Good Shepherd Baptist, I believe we experience the reality of "church family" in its fullest and best sense. Oh, sure, we occasionally get on each other's nerves and we've even been known to outright squabble a bit. But at the end of the day, I've always experienced a true familial love here, one in which foibles are forgiven and differences overlooked and we all rest in the blessed assurance that if we're not enjoying each other's company right now, we will again soon. I think it says a lot about this church family that we end almost every worship service by joining hands and looking each other in the eye and praying for God's shalom upon each other and promising to see each other again. That's family. Or to use the Apostle Paul's metaphor, that's the Body of Christ, unified in love despite differences.

I knew even before I left you at the end of May that I was going to miss that family feeling, that unity of the Body. I knew that I would be apart from you all for three months. My plans included traveling alone to France, where I didn't speak the language very well, and spending a week of that sojourn immersed in a gathering of thousands where I would know no one. Although Connie would be joining me after that, we would be traveling in the United Kingdom where we were only in touch with a couple of people that we knew and those we had not seen for twelve years. Along the way we would separate again for a week and again be thrust into situations where we knew no one. We hear often in this country what a desolate faith landscape there is in Europe – in all our visits to cathedrals and retreat centers, I didn't know if we would really find fellow believers who would welcome us, we who are Americans and Baptists – a couple of appellations not universally popular in the wider world these days. And although I would be safely back at home for the majority of my leave, I wondered what I would be able to find in the way of worshipping community? At the beginning of my time away, I had some real apprehension about being away from my church family, from the Body of Christ of which I knew I was and am an integral part.

Christ's Body is visibly broken, isn't it? There are so many things that separate the members of what should be seen as one Body, connected in one hope and one calling to one Lord by one faith and one baptism. We are spread across the whole Earth, we Christians, and the barriers of

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our deeply ingrained cultures and the languages we speak can seem high and impenetrable. If this were not sufficient to divide us, we have almost since the beginning broken ourselves up into parties, factions, sects and denominations. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that there was almost immediately friction between the Aramaic speakers and the Greek speakers in the Jerusalem church – that’s why we have deacons, to make sure that all the members in need were taken care of equally. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians tells us how that church divided itself between followers of Paul, followers of Apollos, followers of Peter (or Cephas), and, rather smugly, followers of Jesus. The pattern has never stopped, as the Church has divided itself between East and West, Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian, Catholic and Protestant, Lutheran and Calvinist, and so on and so on. We Baptists are particularly good at splitting up. I don’t know if anybody’s ever successfully determined how many subdivisions of Baptists there are just here in the United States, but I’d be willing to bet it’s in excess of a hundred.

In his wisdom, Jesus apparently knew that this was at least likely to happen. In his long prayer on the night he was betrayed, recorded for us in the Gospel According to John, Jesus prayed to his Father that God would protect us so that we would be one, as Father and Son are one. Jesus knew that what John called in Greek “the *κοσμος*” and what modern theologian Walter Wink has called “the domination system” would exert its unholy power on us, make us subject to our own pride and cause us to fight amongst ourselves rather than celebrating our diversity of opinions in love. The problem that Jesus foresaw has haunted his Church from the earliest times until now.

But as we should expect, Jesus’ prayer was far from in vain. Yes, we Christians have been a remarkably petty people over the centuries as relates to our willingness to draw lines in the sand and square off against each other but there has been and continues to be evidence that the Spirit of unity still moves among us. I saw evidence of this while I was away and I continue to see evidence back here at home.

To begin with, I did experience Christian unity and love in far-away France and Great Britain. I think of my experience on Pentecost, joining in worship with believers from around the world at Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris. Most of the service was, of course, in French, with one reading in English and one, if I remember correctly, in German. But there was a real sense of one Lord, one faith, one baptism in that place that morning. I wouldn’t go so far as to say that we all heard the Good News in our own language, but we all understood the sense of what was going on and we all celebrated the goodness of God together. And then there was my week at Taizé, where an even more diverse group of over 2500 worshipped together three times daily for a week. The songs and prayers of our worship were in at least a dozen languages. No, we didn’t all understand everything but again it didn’t really matter. We were one in the Spirit. Better still was the unity of the small group with whom I cleaned bathrooms and studied the Bible daily. We were two Americans, two Brits, an Australian, a Belgian, three Swedes and three Finns. By the end of our week together, we were truly brothers and sisters in Christ and many of us continue our friendship via Facebook. I had a similar experience on Iona, where an existing group of friends from the Cambridge area “adopted” me and an American clergywoman who were both traveling alone. To the outside or inexperienced eye, it may appear that the Body of Christ is irreparably divided by language and culture but when the barrier of physical distance is

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removed, Christians very quickly find ways to love each other and join together without regard to those humanly created walls.

Denominational barriers also faded away at Taizé and Iona. Both of those communities were founded with an ecumenical mission in mind and they have wonderfully lived out that calling to serve Christ's Church without regard to creed. Interestingly, all but one of the Europeans in my Taizé small group were members of the State Church in their respective countries. However much their position may have been legally privileged in their countries, they clearly felt no such privilege in spiritual matters but welcomed each other and those of us who would have been considered "non-conformists" in their lands with equal warmth and joy. I was equally at ease in my interactions with my Anglican friends on Iona in a community founded by a devout Presbyterian.

I'm pleased to be able to remind you that you don't have to travel to one of these communities to experience the sweet spirit of ecumenism. I needed places to worship on Sundays while I was on leave and I was just as warmly welcomed at Maplewood Presbyterian Church and Lynnwood Free Methodist Church as I was at our sister American Baptist churches which I visited. By the way, Rev. Barry Keating, the pastor at Maplewood, is quite a preacher. He and I have occasionally discussed doing a pulpit exchange and I think you'd really enjoy hearing him. I also was honored to participate in the ordination to the priesthood of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of Rev. Jacqueline Berlien, down the street at Trinity Lutheran. A retired pastor from the Disciples tradition and a Catholic priest joined me and the Lutheran clergy in laying hands on Jacquie in blessing. And, as you probably know, I've been involved in leadership in our local ecumenical circles since I've been among you, formerly as convener of the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association and now as a board member and president-elect of the Church Council of Greater Seattle. We've not had an event to gather laity from the South Snohomish churches in a while but there is an opportunity for all of us to celebrate the work of the Church Council coming up at the end of the month. You are all cordially invited to their Annual Dinner and award ceremony. Details are available in "This Week at Good Shepherd" and Evergreen Association is sponsoring a table. I hope some of you will be able to join Connie and me that evening. It's a wonderful thing to experience the love and joy of such a diverse group of Christians, brought together by their passion to extend God's peace and justice in our world.

Speaking of the Evergreen Association, our annual meeting is coming up on October 13-15, as Christy has been kind enough to highlight in the newsletter in my absence. If you've not yet been to an annual meeting of our Association of American Baptist Churches, do yourself a favor and get signed up. The material is inserted in your bulletin this morning. These meetings are always a pretty remarkable example of the unity of the Church that is possible through Jesus. The relationships that have been forged between members of our Euro caucus, the Black Caucus and the Asian Caucus have been a blessing to many of us. And although we Baptists can be a fractious bunch, we manage to set aside our theological differences in Evergreen, so that you will see members of Seattle First Baptist and University Baptist learning and worshipping quite comfortably beside members of congregations that have a far more conservative outlook.

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And, in November, we'll have an even more profound opportunity to experience what many of us thought was an impossible oxymoron: Baptist unity. Some of you will remember that Charlie Scalise, Charlotte Keyes and I attended a gathering in Atlanta three years ago called the "Celebration of the New Baptist Covenant." This New Baptist Covenant is, simply put, a movement to bring together Baptists from all our denominations to celebrate what we share in common rather than to continually focus on the issues that divide us. That meeting three years ago was a roaring success and it was proposed that the group should gather every three years in imitation of the pre-Civil War Triennial Conventions, the last time all Baptist groups in the United States met together. So, this year, there will be another meeting in Atlanta but this time, in recognition of the cost of travel and the blessings of modern technology, there will be simultaneous meetings in nine other cities with preaching from some of our finest orators heard by all groups together via satellite. Our sister Evergreen church, New Beginnings Christian Fellowship in Renton, will be one of those sites and we will gather for local workshops and mission work as well as for the nationally broadcast worship services. The dates are November 17-19 and I hope you will reserve time on your calendar to participate. I'm on the national planning committee, so I'll be sharing details with you as soon as they are formulated.

Unity across theological lines – unity across denominational lines – unity across lines of language and culture and across distance: my sisters and brothers, the Spirit of unity in Christ is moving strongly in our world, despite the naysayers and the doom-criers and the skeptics. There are still many points at which our unity is not yet fulfilled. Ironically, one of the primary points of disagreement in the Body of Christ continues to be the act by which we proclaim our unity, our membership in the Body of Christ – the Lord's Supper, or Communion, or the Eucharist. We don't even agree on what it should be called. I did not receive the bread and wine at Notre Dame, respectful of the theology of the Church of Rome which requires belief in transubstantiation, the literal changing of bread and wine to Body and Blood. At Taizé, the request was that only those who believed in the "Real Presence" of Christ in the elements might participate, so rather than parse careful theological phrases I simply did not partake. But there was no such limitation at Iona Abbey and at Maplewood Presbyterian all are invited to join in the feast, so in those places I was fully in communion with my fellows in the Body of Christ. Here, too, we invite all of those who are called by Christ to join with us in this simple ceremony of remembrance and gratitude. The Gospel According to Luke tells us that on the night that he instituted what we Baptists call an ordinance of the Church, Jesus said to his disciples, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you..." Today, I echo the words of my Lord; not because, like him, I am about to suffer. On the contrary, I think in our time together at Good Shepherd Baptist Church the best is yet to come. I have eagerly awaited this time because I have missed you and looked forward to being reunited with you even as I know that I and all of us are united in the Spirit with Christ Jesus and with all who call on his name, wherever or whenever they may be, in whatever language and tradition they claim the love of Christ. For that love, for God's faithfulness to us, for the bread and the vine that call us to remembrance, thanks be to God!