

Today, across the United States, and this past Thursday, around the world, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters have been celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi, or (to be more formal) the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. The feast day was developed and came into general usage in the last half of the Twelfth Century and the early years of the Thirteenth. It sprang from a desire of some Christians to have a time when the institution of the Lord's Supper or Eucharist could be celebrated with joy. There was already, of course, a commemoration of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday but, as Francis Mershman points out in his article in the Catholic Encyclopedia, "This day, however, was in Holy Week, a season of sadness, during which the minds of the faithful are expected to be occupied with thoughts of the Lord's Passion." And so, in 1264, Pope Urban IV, at the instigation of a Belgian nun called Juliana of Mont Cornillon, directed that the Feast of Corpus Christi be observed throughout Christendom and had Thomas Aquinas write a liturgy for the special day. "This Office," Mershman notes, "is one of the most beautiful in the Roman Breviary and has been admired *even by Protestants*."

The beauty of Aquinas' liturgical writing notwithstanding, I know of no Protestants who celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi and certainly no Baptists. Unlike our sisters and brothers in the Church of Rome, after all, Baptists generally do not subscribe to any kind of theory of the Real Presence of Christ in the elements of Communion. We may take very seriously the deep symbology of the grape juice and bread we eat together once a month, but I've yet to run into a Baptist who expected them to become the true blood and body of Jesus as they were consumed. Still, it should come as no surprise to you that I would suggest we stop this morning and consider the celebration of Corpus Christi, but that we should do it in a uniquely Baptist fashion.

You see, when I hear the words "Corpus Christi" or, more properly, their English equivalent, "the Body of Christ," the commemoration of Jesus' last night before the Cross is not what springs to my mind. To me, the Body of Christ does not refer to a piece of bread, or a bit of matzoh, or those funny crackers some lovingly call "Baptist Chiclets," or even a sanctified wafer. To me, the Body of Christ always means the Church. When I think of the Body of Christ, I think of all the Christians around the world struggling to live out their faith in a meaningful way. When I think of the Body of Christ, I think of that great cloud of witnesses, the believers who have come before us for two millennia, some well-known heroes of the faith, leaving us a record to follow of their discoveries about life in Christ, some living and dying in complete obscurity. When I think of the Body of Christ, I think about all the women and men and boys and girls who've sat beside me in pews all over the U.S. and England, who taught my Sunday School classes and led choirs I sang in, who preached to me and passed me a bulletin and, yes, who served me grape juice and crackers. When I think of the Body of Christ, I think of you – and me – us, the Body of Christ in this place.

My mind started to turn this way a few weeks ago when I noticed that our traditional observance of Festival Sunday would coincide with this notable Catholic feast. It seems to me that Festival Sunday at Good Shepherd Baptist Church is above all things a great celebration of Paul's teaching on the Body of Christ. Many of us who are here today are probably familiar with Paul's magnificent writing in the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians on the Church as the Body of Christ made up of many various parts, but in any event it is summed up more succinctly in the twelfth chapter of Romans, verses 4-8: "4Just as each of us has various parts in one body, and the parts do not all have the same function: 5in the same way, all of us, though there are so many of us,

make up one body in Christ, and as different parts we are all joined to one another. ⁶Then since the gifts that we have differ according to the grace that was given to each of us: if it is a gift of prophecy, we should prophesy as much as our faith tells us; ⁷if it is a gift of practical service, let us devote ourselves to serving; if it is teaching, to teaching; ⁸if it is encouraging, to encouraging. When you give, you should give generously from the heart; if you are put in charge, you must be conscientious; if you do works of mercy, let it be because you enjoy doing them.”

As I look out at you all this morning and think of all the people who were recognized for their service earlier, a couple of things come to mind. First, what a tremendous percentage of our church family ends up acting in leadership and service over the course of a year. And there were some who weren't called up this morning who were last year or the year before, not to mention all of you who I have seen cleaning the kitchen or weeding the yard or stacking chairs without a thought toward whether or not your name was going on a list. Good Shepherd is a church that works together and helps each other – a true Body of Christ. Also, as I think of all of you, I think what a tremendous diversity of gifts are represented here. We have healers and teachers and artists, accountants and musicians, those who care for little ones and those who care for the elderly. We have those who are comfortable standing up in front of a crowd and those who prefer to work quietly in the background. And I've never, in this church, heard the eye say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor the head to the foot, “I have no need of you.” (That's language from I Corinthians 12, by the way.) Instead, we delight in our diversity and look for ways we can learn from each other. I believe that God blesses that very New Testament understanding of how to do church.

Those passages that Paul wrote about the different parts of the body coming together take me to another thought this morning about my Baptist take on Corpus Christi. Just as we need each other and all of our diverse gifts and thoughts and beliefs here at Good Shepherd in order to make one healthy body, so we corporately also need those other segments of the Body of Christ to make one healthy universal Body of Christ. Yesterday, I attended part of the monthly meeting of the board of our Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches. I was struck, as I almost always am, by the very apparent diversity of our denomination. I'm not sure I can tell you how important it is to me to be part of a denomination where there is no majority race, where Americans of European, African, Asian, Hispanic and Native heritage come together in mutual mission, balancing and lifting up each other. And the diversity is clear to me within the Euro Caucus of Evergreen as well – a theological diversity and a gender diversity, which are just as important to me, coming as I do as a refugee from a denomination where theological conformity became a litmus test for fellowship and where women are being denied roles of leadership.

Of course, the Body of Christ is larger than just Evergreen Association or even just Baptists, although I've known some Baptists in my life who would disagree with that. As I think about the Body of Christ today, I'm glad that this is a congregation that values contact with fellow believers from across the wide spectrum of Christianity. Our Sunday mornings have been enlivened over the past year by guest teachers from the old liberal branch of the Presbyterian communion and from the Pentecostal branch of the Holiness movement. We have a few members in good standing here who might well, if pushed, tell you that “Once Catholic, Always Catholic” applies to them. And I am privileged to meet every month with clergy and staff from our local Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, Disciples, Brethren, Unity and Chinese Evangelical

churches. Those of us who attended that group this past week agreed that it was important for us to continue to meet, to pray for each other, to learn from each other, and to discover ways that we could bring together the various bodies we serve to advance the Kingdom of God. That sounds to me like true Corpus Christi.

There is another aspect of our life together as the Body of Christ that comes to my mind as I think of Corpus Christi today. As the Body of Christ, we are empowered, corporately and individually, by the Holy Spirit. Our Pentecost banners are down but in many churches, the season of Pentecost continues. The Spirit that came upon the disciples as wind and fire on that first Pentecost is the same Spirit that convinces us of our brokenness and need for God and is, as that crusty old commentator Cyrus Ingerson Scofield put it, the author of our new life. As members of the Body of Christ, our spirits, which may have been crushed and deadened by the evil in this world, are revived by the Holy Spirit. We have new life; we are, as Jesus recommended to Nicodemus, born again.

For the part of the Universal Church that is not celebrating Corpus Christi today, the lectionary has 3 passages that talk about new life. In the Old Testament reading, from I Kings 17, and in the Gospel reading, from Luke 7, it is stories about life literally restored to the dead. The passage in I Kings tells the story of the prophet Elijah and how he took refuge with a widow and her son during a famine and kept them from starving. Despite the presence of the prophet, however, the boy sickened and died. Confronted by his hostess' grief, the prophet cries out to the Lord and the child is revived. Similarly, in Luke, Jesus comes upon the funeral procession of a widow's son, the woman's sole support and hope for the future. Like Elijah before him, Jesus raises the dead boy. These are wonderful stories about the miraculous provision of God for the helpless.

But the third passage in today's lectionary that addresses new life strikes me as even more miraculous in some ways. It's the passage I read to you earlier from Galatians. It's a story, not about a poor widow and a sickly child, but about a proud and strong young man with all the advantages of a good education and the right connections, with the drive and the standing to get ahead in the world, and a ruthless streak that led him even to murder in the name of what he thought was right. I'm speaking, of course, of Saul of Tarsus, known after his introduction to new life as Paul the Apostle. The miracle here is that that proud and cocksure young man became completely humble before God and subjected himself to the same men that he had been trying to have killed as heretics. The miracle also is that those men accepted him for what he said he had become, on the word of only two of their number, and that acceptance was enough to establish him as an apostle of Christ in churches around the Mediterranean. To continue in our Body of Christ metaphor, it is as if Paul had been a deadly tumor, unexpectedly turned benign and even absorbed into the body as a newly healthful organ. The body's immune system, the leadership in Jerusalem, could have attacked him and driven him out, like a virus destroyed by white blood cells. Instead, he became a trusted co-worker for the Good News of Jesus Christ.

It was the gracious intervention of God that brought new life to Paul, the Spirit which gives new life to the Body, just as it is the Spirit that teaches us to lay aside all the divisions that the world teaches in order that we may work together as one. On this day of Corpus Christi, let us give thanks that the Holy Spirit dwells in us as well, bring us new life in God's great plan. Let us

give thanks that we are become the Body of Christ, brought together in all of our strange diversity to form a whole greater than the sum of our parts. Let us give thanks that the Spirit has made us not just the Body of Christ in this place but a part of a greater Body yet, Christ's Body which stretches across space and time, reconciling all of Creation unto God. And let us pray, fervently pray, that God would continue to infuse us with the Spirit, so that we might take up the mantle of Jesus to spread the Good News, to care for the widow and the orphan, the oppressed and the hungry, the blind and the captive, the stranger and the sojourner. Let us raise our voices in prayer to our God of grace and glory, that we might be granted wisdom and courage for the facing of this hour and the living of these days, that we might prove ourselves, truly the Body of Christ on this Festival Sunday of our Baptist Corpus Christi.