

**RESET: Church.**

*1st Corinthians 12:4-13, 25-27. Trinity United Methodist Church  
January 23-24, 2010 Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher*

A week ago, on a dark, cold winter's night, I had the opportunity to spend a three and a half hours in our 13-year old van. With its really lousy stereo system.

Since the radio in the van doesn't work, doesn't pick up anything but static, I loaded the CD changer -which is conveniently located behind and beneath the front passenger's seat- with some great CD's.

I had two of the digitally remastered Beatles' CD's. I loaded the new Nora Jones CD. I loaded a CD by the great South African jazz musician, Hugh Masekela. I put in one of the CD's off *The Very Best of Fleetwood Mac*, and I included the soundtrack from the film of Bob Dylan's life, *I'm Not There*.

I hugged two little girls, threw my overnight bag in the back of the van, and headed west. Punched the "Power" button on the stereo...the radio. And must started coming out of these tiny, cheap, "stock" speakers that are located in the dash. The songs were familiar. It was good stuff. But it sounded thin...like some poor imitation of the real deal.

Those digitally remastered CD's with songs like *Yesterday* and "*Can't Buy Me Love*" and "*Help?*" The CD with the amazing music of Masekela's trumpet? The sweet voice of Norah Jones? I could hear them through those speakers, but I had the feeling that the music should have been so much better! Too much of the sound was never making it through the speakers. There was music I wasn't hearing.

Today we're talking about what God wants the Church to be and how our experience of God in the Church can be real and powerful and joy-filled and true and life changing and life saving.

So I found myself thinking, this past week, about those hours I spent in the van. When it seemed like there was more music than I was getting...hearing.

I wonder how many of us feel like that when it comes to the Church. We have this hunger for God, we have this eagerness to come face-to-face with a truth that can change our lives, we are yearning for connection with people in genuine, loving, honest community, and yet our experience of Church is too often like listening to Hugh Masekela through cheap speakers. God's music is richer, fuller than the notes we hear in and through the Church.

I am convinced God has a word for us, today, in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Let's look at what this first century Jesus follower has to say about the Church. And before we are done today, I want to say a couple of things directly to you...about this place...this time... and your life with God.

The first thing I want you to notice, in this passage, is a phrase Paul uses near the very end of the reading: *You are Christ's body – that's who you are! You must never forget this.*

The Church is the Body of Christ.

Paul doesn't say the Church is a religious institution or a force for good or a non-profit organization that enriches the community, here. No, Paul says the Church is the Body of Christ.

Which means a couple of things.

To say the Church is the Body of Christ means Jesus is at the heart of everything the Church is and does. Not a denomination. Not a mission statement. Not tradition and ritual. Not our preferences...what you and I want. No, at the heart of the Church, everything it does and everything it is, is Jesus.

There is a small letter in the back of the New Testament called 1<sup>st</sup> Peter. The writer talks about the Church being made up not of walls and bricks and books of religious law but of people. The Church, says 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2, is this living Temple, built with the lives of people who trust Jesus...love Jesus...find life in Jesus.

The cornerstone of the Temple, 1<sup>st</sup> Peter says, is the living Stone named Jesus. He is the source of life. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:4 says, *Welcome to the living Stone, the source of life. The workmen (the religious experts and Bible scholars and preachers and lawyers) took one look (at Jesus) and threw it out; God set it in the place of honor. Present yourselves as building stones for the construction of a sanctuary vibrant with life, in which you'll serve as holy priests offering Christ-approved lives up to God.* Peter goes on to say, to those who trust in this stone as the foundation of life....they will never have cause to regret.

The Church is the Body of Christ. Everything the Church is and does is about Jesus.

Author Frederica Mathewes-Greene writes about her spiritual journey:

*When I was around eight or nine, I went through a spurt of having very strong faith. My parents didn't think it was entirely healthy to be that religious. When I'd say that I wanted to be a nun (because we didn't know of any other way of giving your whole life to Christ), they said that was neurotic and that I was running away from life. So I got the message that it wasn't good to be too religious.*

*When I was 12 or 13, I began to doubt the entire Christian story. ...It just sounded preposterous to me. I rejected Christianity with vehemence.*

*(Years later) I was with my husband on our honeymoon, hitchhiking around Europe. He was an atheist who had been assigned in one of his classes to read a gospel. And he kept saying, "There's something about Jesus. I know that he's speaking the truth. I'm an atheist. But if Jesus says there's a God, there must be a God."*

*It was a very scary experience for me (Frederica writes), because I didn't want him to be a Christian.*

*We're in Dublin sightseeing. I walk into a church. We're admiring the windows and altar and so forth. In a corner of the church there was a small altar with a white marble statue that showed Jesus' heart exposed on his chest with flames coming out of the top and thorns wrapped around the heart. As I was looking at this, I suddenly realized that I was on my knees. And as if a radio inside me suddenly clicked on, I could hear a voice. I didn't hear it with my ears, but it was like a presence that filled me. The voice said, "I am your life. You thought that your life was your history, your name, your personality. You thought that your life was the fact that your heart beats. But that is not your life. I am your life. I am the foundation of everything else in your life."*

*I started reading the Bible, and I found that I just disagreed with Jesus about a lot of things. But something had happened to me in that church in which I realized that I didn't know everything about the world.*

*Gradually we were able to come to faith. It was several months later that a friend of ours said, "Well, have you ever given your hearts to Jesus? Have you ever asked Jesus to be your Lord?" You have to picture that both of us grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, him Episcopalian, me Catholic, and our response was, "We're not Southern Baptists." Our association with that kind of talk is that you have to be Southern Baptist for Jesus to be your Lord.*

*(The friend) said, "Actually, it's for everybody."*

*We said, "Well, you know, we're in graduate school."*

*"No, even for you."*

*So the three of us knelt together and prayed and asked Jesus to be our Lord, having no idea what that would mean but wanting so much to find out. ("The Dick Staub Interview: Frederica Mathewes-Greene," Christianity Today.com, 10-1-02.)*

The Church is the Body of Christ. Which means it is a community of people, a living Temple, built out of the lives of people who have somehow found themselves on their knees before him. Trusting him as the living cornerstone of their lives.

Now, many of you in this room need to hear something else: the Church is also a place for people to be who aren't sure. It is a place wide enough, big enough, for people who have more questions than answers, more doubt than faith.

So some of us here have been on our knees. But some of us...more than just a few of us...aren't sure.

So the Church is this big Temple...where people are all over the place in terms of faith. The Church is a big Temple where people with questions and doubts are encouraged to hang out, seek God, grow towards a new kind of relationship with God.

You, Paul says, are the Body of Christ.

The Church is the Body of Christ.

Which means that everything the Church is and everything the Church does is about Jesus. Jesus is the living Stone at the center of the living Temple that is the Church. It's a community of people who have been on their knees...rubbing shoulders and lives with those who still aren't sure.

The second thing Paul is saying, when Paul says the Church is the Body of Christ, is that we are to love the Church.

Some of us respect the Church. I hear that a lot from people. People tell me they are really glad to see what Jesus followers do when it comes to feeding the hungry. Filling the shelves at Church Community Services. Or putting loving, caring adult tutors in classrooms all over the area to work with children. Or staffing hospitals and feeding stations in Haiti. Even people in the government, after Hurricane Katrina, said the Church offered the quickest and most effective response to the suffering and need along the Gulf Coast.

Some of us respect the Church.

Some of us tolerate the Church. We see the hypocrisy of Jesus followers and it just turns us off. We see people in our own congregation be selfish or mean or two-faced, we rub shoulders with pastors and leaders who are so human and limited it makes us want to weep, and we can barely tolerate the Church. We hear a Christian leader explain the people of Haiti are suffering because they made a pact with the devil to be free of France, over one

hundred years ago, and we don't know whether to scream, cry or just walk away. Get as far away from the Church as we can.

Sometimes the Body we call the Church isn't pretty.

Some of us respect the Church.

Some of us can barely tolerate the Church.

I want to say something, and then I will say it again near the end of the sermon: I'm sorry for every moment, every time, when my words and my life and my leadership have gotten in the way of God instead of helping to -as Paul says it- show who God is. For the sin and fear and immaturity in my life that has caused frustration and pain in your life, for the parts of me that have obscured Jesus rather than lifting Jesus up, I am so sorry. I do my best...and sometimes my best falls far short of what Jesus wants and needs. So if you are leaning back, if your connection to this place has gotten loose because of my limitations and mistakes and sin, I ask for your forgiveness. Don't give up on me. My only hope is that some of the light of God is able to shine through the broken pieces that are my life.

Some people respect the Body of Christ that is the Church.

Some people tolerate the Church.

But if the Church is the Body of Christ, then doesn't it make sense that we are to love it? Cherish it? Honor it? Give our hearts to it?

At Trinity we talk about our devotion to the Body getting lived out as we are Growing in God, Growing Together, and Growing in Service. Every week, in our weekly email devotional, we say we express our devotion in some pretty basic ways: Giving one hour each week in worship; Giving one hour weekly in Bible study or our small group; and, Giving one hour each week in service. Three hours a week. A simple way, a beginning place, to show our love for the Body of Christ.

Is love a word you would use to describe your feelings towards the Church?

If you'll turn to the last book of the New Testament, look at the opening verses of Revelation 21. The writer, an early Jesus follower who had been condemned to exile on an island in the Mediterranean, sees how things will be at the end of time.

John, the writer of Revelation, talks about the Church as the New Jerusalem. He says the New Jerusalem will be like a bride (:2) beautifully dressed for her husband. The Church, John says, is like a bride and God waits for his bride.

Have you ever seen the way a groom looks at his bride when she comes to the back door of the Church, stands there waiting for the organist or band to signal it is time to enter, and then steps towards him. Have you seen the love in the man's eyes...the pride...the delight...the affection...the eagerness to be with the one he loves?

Do you have that look in your eyes when you look at Christ's Church...our Church? How long has it been since you had that look in your eyes? What will you and God do together so that you will have love in your heart when you look at the Church? Have you ever looked at the Church with eyes that dance with love and affection and devotion and grace?

Last weekend I was in Columbus. The way we end the day is by gathering upstairs for prayers. Ella is in the bed. Gathering blankies around her. She has her jammies on. Wearing socks. She has a sippy cup in her hand as she enjoys a drink of milk. Mommy usually climbs into bed and reads her a story. Other adults gather around the bed, in the nearly dark room, and listen. Then, it is time to pray. And we name everyone in the family. Aunts and uncles

are named. Little sister and Daddy and Mommy are named. Grandma and Grandpa. Then, a trip to a museum...or a McDonalds' indoor playground...or the snow...they are all named. Little Green People, from Toy Story, are named.

Do you know what I noticed last week?

I noticed her feet. In those little purple socks. Moving around on the bed as Mommy read the story. Sort of doing their own little dance on the cover of the bed as the story was read. I would walk to the other side of the world to keep those feet safe, you know? I felt such an affection, such delight, such love, that I thought my heart would burst.

Do you look at the Church with that kind of love...that kind of affection...that kind of delight?

The third thing Paul is saying, when he says the Church is the Body of Christ, is that the Church is to do what Jesus would do.

Jesus, in Luke 4, shows up in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth. He stands up in worship and reads from the scroll of Isaiah: *God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"*

The Church is the Body of Christ.

That means we should be doing what Jesus would do.

His hands...his feet...his voice...his heart...in the world. Doing what Jesus would do. That is what the Church is to be about. If Jesus would do it, then the Church is called to do it!

At Trinity we talk about having a double mission. Both parts of our mission are essential. Non-debatable. They are both what we are about.

The first part of our mission is a Matthew 28 mission. At the end of Matthew 28 the risen Christ tells his followers that he is sending them out into the world to make disciples. Training -notice the word Eugene Peterson uses in *The Message*- people, far and near, in the Jesus way of life. Marking them with baptism so they -and the world- will know they belong to God. Are loved by God. Know their life has incredible value.

In worship, in small groups, in our play together, in our mission trip experiences, in our youth ministry, we have a God-given mission to make disciples. Help people step into a living, saving, healing relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Doing what we can so people see the heart of God in Jesus, the way Frederica did in that Irish chapel. Helping them hear the voice that is saying, "I am your life."

The word "saved," as we remind one another frequently, in Greek can mean "to be made whole." "To be healed." "To be made well."

There is a second part to our mission at Trinity, and that is something we call being a "Matthew 25 Church." If you look at that chapter in Matthew's gospel, Jesus is telling a story about the last judgment. And he says the way God separates the sheep from the goats, the saved from the lost, will be whether we fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, visited the sick, clothed the naked, and gave shelter to the homeless.

So -and we certainly are not alone in this- do what we can to feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Welcome the stranger. Build houses for the homeless. Be a loving,

encouraging presence to children in the classrooms across this community. There is talk, now, about a Trinity mission trip to Haiti. As soon as that is possible.

If we are the Body of Christ, then we are to spend our lives on this earth doing what Jesus would do.

The fourth message in this section of scripture is the work of the Body will be done by the members of the Body.

Look at 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:4-6: *God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows how God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people!*

The Church is a community where everyone has something God can use. Everyone has been given a gift by God that can be used to do what Jesus needs to have done. It is not a place where a few religious experts or pros are the pastors and do the ministry.

You'll find that at Trinity.

This is a Body where everyone is in ministry.

This is a Church where the pastors and paid staff are all about giving ministry away.

All of us with different gifts, all of us needing one another to do what God needs done, and all of us working together as one Body.

Each of us, the Bible says, has been given a gift by God that can be used to show the world who God is (1 Cor. 12:6).

This is a place where God calls each and every one of us to roll up our sleeves and go to work. For God. So that we can, together, show the world who God is!

Before we end this morning, I want to say a couple of very direct things to you.

If you are new to Trinity, and you wonder how long you must serve your probationary period before finally "making" it into the Church, I want you to step on in. This place is wide open for you. (*The preacher holds up a set of keys.*) Here are the keys to the Church! Grab them...make this place your place...the door is wide open! There is no probationary period, no secret handshake, no inner political circle you have to please – the doors are wide open for you...to you. Take the keys!

If you have been serving and you are feeling overwhelmed, burned out, it is okay to take a break. We want you to know that. You don't need to feel guilty about stepping out of leadership or serving for a time. Sometimes people think the only way to get out of leadership or serving, in a Church, is to die or go to another Church. If you have served, if you have given and given yourself away, and you are feeling empty or tired, we want you to know it is okay to stop. Take a time of Sabbath. It's okay. (*The preacher holds up a small alarm clock.*)

Do you know what this stands for? *Timeout!*

It's okay to stop serving for a season. Okay to stop doing. Okay to take a timeout or experience the Old Testament idea of Jubilee...where debts were forgiven and servants were set free. If you are feeling exhausted, depleted, it is okay to stop. Take a break.

If you have been wounded or hurt by someone or something here, or at another church, I want to ask for your forgiveness. I don't want you to give up on God because of something I have said or not said, done or not done. So if you have been hurt here, I am sorry. Maybe you've been hurt not by me but by someone else. Or the nonsense you have seen going on in the Church.

*(The preacher holds up an eraser.)* Do you know what this is? An eraser! Maybe if you have been hurt, wounded, it is time to consider forgiving. Wiping the slate clean. So you can start leaning *into* the Church rather *out of* the Church. Ask God to help erase the hurt, leave the resentment behind, and see what God can do in your life through the Church.

I am praying you'll somehow find -with God's help- the ability to forgive us. Forgive me. Forgive the Church or the people in your small group. And move on...keep growing in God...move beyond the hurt and re-engage. Throw your heart into what God is doing here.

If you are someone who has been blessed by the work of God in this place, but you haven't yet found a place to serve, I invite you -between now and Easter- find one way to serve God here. Call the Church office. Speak with Amy Matherly or one of the staff.

*(The preacher holds up a denim shirt.)* Do you know what this is? It's a work sheet. If you are being blessed by God here, if you are giving your money, worshipping and leaving, counting on others to teach the children's classes or greet people at the door or serve on the Finance Committee, jump in! Get a job! Find a place where there is a need...and stop floating along: get a job!

I need to say something to those of you who come here, week after week, as "resident critics." You know who you are. You are always trying to decide if you'll come back, keep making this Church your provider of religious goods and services, or whether you'll go down the road to another place...with cooler stuff and people.

*(The preacher holds up a checkbook.)* Do you know what this is? A checkbook. What do you do with the checkbook register? Yep...you keep the balance. You add...you subtract.

And that is what some of you are doing when you come into worship or the nursery or your small group. You are keeping score. The coffee is good...you give us a +10. The restrooms need a new coat of paint...you give us a -5. You like the Praise Team and give us a +15 but the preacher's sermons are way too long so you give the short, bald guy a -25. You are leaning back, watching, keeping score...not really happy with what God is doing here.

If you have been leaning back, unhappy with the direction or ministry or people or worship life or beliefs you see expressed and lived out at Trinity, I want you to know it is okay for you to go. If you are not happy here, if you find yourself coming into worship or into the building or into your small group with a score card in your back pocket, marking us down to see whether or not we will be your Church next week, God wants you to stop that.

It is never healthy or good for someone to be in a community of Jesus followers, be unhappy, persistently critical, and leaning back. No Church is for everyone. So if you need to go, it is okay to go. We can still be friends. Still talk grandkids or Big Ten basketball or go out to dinner together. Still talk with one another at the Y. But you can go if you need to go.

*(The preacher unravels a string of Christmas tree lights and holds them up.)* Do you know what these are? Yep...Christmas tree lights. Sharon made the mistake of being gone for a day or two when we were getting the house decorated. I find this strand of colorful Christmas tree lights and decided to wrap them around this really tall plant in the entryway in

our home. We have this lovely entryway with a hardwood floor and an antique sewing machine. I wrapped these lights around that plant and plugged the lights in.

Sharon came home, walked in the door to see these lights, and said, "Oh, my!"

I said, "Aren't they crazy cool?!"

She said, "They sure are different. Are you positive you want them there?"

I said, "Yep. I think they are funny...kind of a blast."

Do you know why I am plugging this strand of lights in and letting them fall across the worship platform? Because it is fun...it is a joyful thing. Don't you believe God wants joy and fun to be a part of our life when we come together as Jesus followers? If there isn't joy in our life here, then there is something. So there you go...God wants us to light up the world!

Finally, if you have been thinking of following Jesus...but that hasn't happened: why not today? My object for this part of the message is behind: the cross. If you feel God calling you into a new kind of relationship, if you hear the voice of Jesus speaking to you, saying, "I am the One who is your life," I invite you to say "Yes." Make the decision that Jesus will be what your life is all about.

So I found myself thinking, this past week, about those hours I spent in the van. When it seemed like there was more music than I was getting...hearing.

I wonder how many of us feel like that when it comes to the Church. We have this hunger for God, we have this eagerness to come face-to-face with a truth that can change our lives, we are yearning for connection with people in genuine, loving, honest community, and yet our experience of Church is too often like listening to Hugh Masekela through cheap speakers. God's music is richer, fuller than the notes we hear in and through the Church.

What needs to change, for you?

What needs to change, in you?