

“Remembering the Body of Christ”

Romans 12:9-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 30, 2020

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be called back into the
Body of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

I wanted us to read that scripture responsively because one of the most important things for us to do today, especially as we gather at the park together, is to remember why we're here. And by “here” I mean wherever you are, being part of Christ's church. What does it mean to be part of Christ's church? Why do you do it, and how does it impact your life? These verses from Romans 12 make up a great litany describing the sort of life we who make up the church are called to live. This is not some weak-tea list of ways to be polite to others; rather, it invites us into the fearless compassion and sacrificial commitment to justice that characterized everything Jesus did.

I called this sermon “Remembering the Body of Christ” partially tongue-in-cheek. I figured that being together in the park would jog the memories of our hearts: “Oh yeah, I go to church with that person! And her! And him! And them! I remember now!” It is so good for us to renew our bonds by seeing each other face to face – or at least top of the face to top of the face! Absence may make the heart grow fonder, but it may also make our memories vaguer and our sense of belonging to one another a little worn. Faith that is vague and worn is not the faith we need today.

So it is good that many of us can gather under these trees today and look each other in the eye. But even more importantly than remembering who we go to church with is remembering why. Whose body are we putting back together, by remembering it? There's a reason we almost always call the Body of Christ the Body of Christ, and not just the Body. It's because the Christ part is the most important part! And when we're scattered out into the world, like we are now, expected to embody Christ on our own, it's vital that we take every chance we can get to remind ourselves what that looks like.

In case you'd forgotten for a moment, the world is a really hard place to be living right now. Even without a global pandemic we would be saying things are bad: wildfires, hurricanes, and other destructive consequences of climate change; racist police violence, vigilantes in the streets, and a vast chasm between neighbors about how to respond; threats to democracy, the growth of misinformation as a regular part of our societal discourse, and a nation more divided than we've been since the Civil War. And that's without the locusts and the murder hornets and the passing of Chadwick Boseman. But on top of all of that, we are, in fact, in the middle of a global pandemic, so multiply the stress and fear and confusion by 1000 million and then add seven. No wonder it's hard to remember what it means to embody Christ!

This litany we read together from Romans encompasses much of what it means to be Christ-like. It exhorts us to compassion and humility, for instance, as we relate to others. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" is one of our

go-to phrases when we talk about what it means to have a church family. But it also calls us beyond that circle of beloveds with the command to “extend hospitality to strangers.”

Another attribute of Christian living lifted up in these verses is especially significant for us to name in these days when our homebound lives can easily tempt us into apathy. Throughout these verses we are encouraged to have a passionate faith. Paul wants us to be enthusiastic Christ-followers! We could easily miss this part because it uses some of the most antiquated language in the whole passage: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit.” That’s not really how we talk these days, but we can certainly appreciate how important and challenging it is to stay dedicated to and even excited about our faith. What if instead of drifting away from participation because it’s harder when we’re scattered, we could use this strange season to, as Paul puts it, “be patient in suffering” and “persevere in prayer”? As we enjoy this special moment of physical proximity today, let us commit ourselves to reducing the enthusiasm gap that pandemic inflicts upon our church family. May God re-ignite the flames of passion within our hearts, that we might share the light of Christ with renewed gusto!

So, compassion, humility, devotion – these are all requirements of the faith. But they’re not that different from just being a decent person. The largest portion of this passage is devoted to two aspects of Christ-likeness that are harder to maintain: righteousness and sacrificial, faithful forgiveness. This is where our commitment to embody Christ in the world is sorely tested, when the demands of justice push up

against our comfort zones and our desire to get the last word or get even are confronted by the self-sacrificial trust of Jesus. In some sense, what Jesus did on earth is summed up in verse 21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

We live in a society that applauds us when we get in a juicy zinger demeaning that idiot on the other side of the cultural divide. We have so many new forms of communication at our fingertips that make it easier to forget that other people are also beloved children of God. Revenge is considered a right, if not a duty. “You gotta teach ‘em a lesson!” Even Paul and the writer of Proverbs who he’s quoting understand how satisfying payback is, as their suggestion that providing our enemies with food and drink is a good idea because it will “heap burning coals on their heads” suggests. In this time of extreme division and dehumanizing discourse, it is more important than ever that we embody the righteousness and mercy of God revealed through Christ.

Paul calls us to “hate what is evil,” but also reminds us that Jesus teaches us to “bless those who persecute” us. He’s not saying it’s easy. Verse 18 makes clear that we can only do so much: “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” “So far as it depends on you” – it’s a key phrase to understanding how the rest of this works. Follow Christ “so far as it depends on you,” and let God take care of the rest, Paul says. Part of remembering the Body of Christ is understanding that we are mere members of it; we are not God. Let God be God.

So as we gather together today, to re-constitute the Body of Christ, let us find our inspiration, our direction, and our purpose in Christ. Let us recall that we have been baptized into a love that is sacrificial, forgiving, and powerful. Let us re-commit ourselves to hungering and thirsting for righteousness and practicing humble compassion with all of God's children. Let us look one another in the eye and find the strength to be Christ's church in this broken, hurting world. Hallelujah and Amen!