

In Christ Alone, Pt. 5
In Christ=In His Body
Acts 2: 3-12; Galatians 3: 26-28; Hebrews 10: 24-25

**First Presbyterian Church
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To be in Christ is to be joined to his body. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “For we are members of his body, of his flesh and of his bones” (Eph. 5: 30). The body of Christ has to be understood on at least three levels. The body of Christ is, first of all, the body Jesus inhabits. He’s the Son of God who came to us as a man. He died in his body and rose in the same body, now transformed and outfitted for heaven. He returned to heaven still in his body, fully God and fully man. The dust of earth has penetrated the glories of heaven. Jesus loves his body; he keeps it forever. Second, the body of Christ is what we experience sacramentally. Breaking the bread, Jesus said, “This is my *body*, given for you.” We partake of the life-giving power of his resurrected body when we partake of the Lord’s Supper in faith. We’re spiritually joined to his body in heaven. And on earth, we’re spiritually joined to all those who share the Supper. Because, third, the body of Christ includes all those who are joined to Jesus. His church. He is the head and we are the members of his body, each with different functions and abilities. The body of Christ is Jesus himself, Jesus in the sacrament, and Jesus in his people.

Being joined to the body of Christ is one of our highest glories. Christianity is not primarily a private form of spiritual practice. It’s not merely an ethic. It’s a relationship. And not just between me and Jesus. But between each believer and every other believer. We are members of one mystical body. Private spirituality is not Christian life. Believers in self-chosen isolation are not living out being in Christ. If we are in Christ at all, we’re connected organically to all those others who are in Christ. Let’s look today at three passages to take us deeper in this truth.

Our first passage this morning takes us to the wild story of the Holy Spirit being poured out upon the first believers. Jerusalem was filled with visitors. Earlier in the year, people had come from all over the world to celebrate the Passover feast. Passover commemorated the deliverance of the LORD’s people from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Fifty days later the city swelled again with pilgrims for the feast of Pentecost. They celebrated God’s giving of the 10 commandments to the people through Moses. At the first Pentecost God gave the law. At the first Pentecost after Jesus, God gave the Spirit. A mighty wind blew.

Tongues of fire settled on the disciples, and thousands rushed to see what was happening. The disciples were speaking, but in many different languages.



The Bible goes on to list fifteen different ethnic groups with distinct languages that were present. Each heard the disciples speaking in their particular language. The kinds of people came from all over the known world. There were Jews from as far away as Rome, from the Greek island of Crete, from Libya in North Africa, from the desert of Arabia, from the land of pyramids in Egypt, from what is today called Turkey and even from a rival empire to Rome called the Parthians. They were almost all Jews whose ancestors had been dispersed around the world. Now they shared a heritage but were distinguished by language, customs and probably mixed ethnicity. Thousands of people gathered from at least fifteen different distinct groups. All of them wondered that the disciples spoke in a strong Galilean dialect. Hey, these are Grand Isle Cajuns! How is it we are understanding them?

People back then knew ethnic distinctions. They knew that as humans, we are different and we notice differences and we judge people by such differences. We tend towards our own tribes. The Scriptures don't denigrate and abolish distinctions in language and culture. Those all stay. But something happens that creates a unity that underlies these ethnic particulars. The people are given a deeper identity marker that bonds them heart to heart.

What is it? A shared story. And then a shared experience of responding to that story. Peter explained to the assembled crowd, perhaps speaking in the common language of either Aramaic or Greek. He told them how the LORD I AM of Israel had sent his Son Jesus to do mighty works of healing and love. But, he said to the whole group, *you* crucified him. Yes, religious leaders and Roman soldiers officially carried it out. You might not even have been in town then. But nevertheless, you and I put Jesus to death. Because he died for our sin. You, each of you, are liable for the need of Jesus to die. But God raised him from the dead, exalted him to his right hand. Jesus received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, and he has poured out his Spirit today. That's what you're seeing and hearing. So know the truth, "God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified."

We have a shared story. One in which we all participated. God sent his Son Jesus to bless each of us. Jesus died because of our sins and to take away our sins. We are liable for his death. We have shared culpability that reduces our egos to cinders. But Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we can have a shared Savior and Lord. His victory can be your victory.

The book of Acts tells us that when the people heard this news, they were cut to the heart. "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter told them the simple truth, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you, and to your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2: 38-39). That day 3000 listeners got baptized. They passed from darkness to light. They found the deeper unity of shared conviction of sin, shared acceptance of forgiveness, and shared surrender to the Lordship of Jesus.

Never again do we hear such a list of different cultural and ethnic groups. Those distinctions didn't disappear. They just lost their importance compared to the shared experience of the blessed Holy Spirit filling their hearts with the forgiveness and resurrection life of Jesus.

Of course there were some struggles. Not long after, the Greek Christians complained that the Jewish widows were getting more share of the food than the Greek widows. But such tribalizing was always resisted. We know that in the future, the great thinkers and writers of the church would come from *all* these regions. They would have distinctive styles of expression, but overall, the unity of thought and spirit was stunning. Even today, if you want to research how the early church came to understand Jesus, you will read writers from Africa, Syria, Italy, France, Turkey, Egypt, and Jerusalem. But they will each and all be united in essential beliefs, in shared experience of worship and in common mission. We have from the beginning been multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural, united by one gospel. Just for an example, think of how we resonate with phrases like this: "You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you....O Lord, make me holy, but not just yet!" When you read Augustine's *Confessions* you get bowled over by realizing how much you spiritually have in common with a North African who spoke old Latin and wrote in the late 300's.

In our second passage, Paul wrote to the Galatians, expanding on the verse we've been learning together, "For in Christ Jesus, you are all sons of God through

faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3: 26-28). No, they didn’t all become unisex. They didn’t stop noticing skin hues and nose sizes and accents and social status. We always notice those things. But they found something deeper that bound them together. The deepest thing that connects us is our essential identity of being *in Christ*. We died to ourselves and got raised in him. In the process, we found each other coming out of the waters, dripping with grace together. We bowed at the foot of the cross, peeped open an eye, looked around and saw each other worshipping Jesus. We’re bonded forever.

There’s a reason why tribalizing is ripping the fabric of our country. We’re being told that the identity markers that matter most are gender, race, sexuality, physical ability, and wealth. That’s a shallow way to view human beings. We have a deeper story. A better, more uniting understanding. We share being created in God’s image. That’s the first true thing about each person: God made you and loves you. We share a heart that is turned against God. I chose myself over God, and it’s not because it’s someone else’s fault. It’s not because I don’t have what you have. It’s because that’s what we do as humans. And we have a shared Redeemer. One died for all. God so loved the world. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Be reconciled to God. Discover the truth of your being in Christ. We have a shared mission: he died for all that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and rose (2 Cor. 5: 15). This news and this love is what liberates us and gives us true life.

So let’s close with a look at our third passage. Hebrews 10 reminds believers of their responsibility to one another. “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” In younger days, when I was feeling diabolical, I might have asked a group, “So why do we come to church?” It was a set up because someone would inevitably say, “To get something out of it. To get filled up when we’re empty. To get help for the week ahead.” And I just as inevitably would say, “Let’s look at Hebrews 10: 24-25. What reasons does this passage give for gathering together?” Now I’ve repented of asking this question in a way that humiliates people. But I’m still passionate about the truth in these Scriptures.

We meet together in order to encourage each other! We’re called to stir one another up to love and good works. I don’t come to the assembly of believers for me. But for you. I get a Sunday decision about 8 times a year. And I have to

remember this passage. Because I might think, “Well, I don’t really need church this morning. I’m not sure who’s preaching. It might be that guy who shouts. Or that guy who just can’t conclude a thought. Or the music might not be good. Or I just need a chill day. Or I don’t really know anybody.” Generally, those thoughts are all rubbish. I don’t go to church for me. Scripture says I go for you.

We gather to encourage one another. Physical presence encourages everyone, even if you don’t say a word. But if you can say a word, encouragement of other believers goes a long way. So does rallying enthusiasm for ministries. For how we see all our work and activities as opportunity to love and bear witness to the love of Jesus. We form a living temple for the worship of God every time we come together to praise our Lord. One block of stone does not a temple make! We form a lovely sanctuary whenever we are here.

As I talk with my colleagues around the country, I know there is great concern for what they call “the drift and shift.” As Covid dissipates, will everyone come back? Or will some drift? Will some get used to staying in their jammies? Will they lose their will to leave home and mix it up with others? Will they find another community because isolation has made them feel disconnected? These are urgent questions.

I love that we have such a robust online community. We’ve got an amazing media team that has kept us connected through dangerous days. I’ve loved hearing from worshippers around the city and the nation. Of course, some who are vulnerable need to stay away a while longer. But some don’t! We need you, as things open up, to come create a temple of praise. Come encourage us! Come stir us up to love and good deeds. Never underestimate the power of your sweet face smiling on your brothers and sisters in Christ!

Being in Christ connects us to one another in eternal bonds. The Lord Jesus does not flatten us into some bland homogenous unity. His Spirit awakens the unique personalities, gifts and insights of each believer. He brings us alive. He also creates a unity deeper than tribalism. Skin color, biology, desire, cash—none of these singly or together are adequate to identify creatures uniquely made in the image of God. We have a better story. We joyfully embrace a shared status as created and beloved. Finding all the fault in the world out there in groups that oppress will cure neither my woes nor the world’s. We have a better story. We realistically embrace a shared sinfulness. Because we have a Savior available to all. He unites people across cultures, colors, continents and centuries. God made this Jesus, whom we crucified, to be both Lord and Christ. Brothers, what shall we

do? As ever, the news is that the promise is for you, each unique one, and to your children, to all who are far off. As ever, every day, Repent, and believe the gospel! In Christ, with one another, is your truest identity.