

In Christ Alone, Pt. 6

Body Life

Romans 12: 3-17

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**Palm Sunday March 28, AD 2021
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Isn't it grand to have Palm Sunday again as a gathered church! I love enacting the Triumphal Entry of Jesus. We realize that in Christ, "I was there!" We cherish the moment when, for once, we all got it. This is the Lord! He has come to save us! Hosanna in the Highest. And what a joy to enact this with our children leading the praises. We all get to embody the story as one church.

And that leads us into our focus on *In Christ Alone* this week. The Lord Jesus has not joined us to himself as isolated individuals. We are not single satellites orbiting around the sun of his love. Rather, we are members of the body of which Jesus is the head. We belong to each other as lungs, fingers, or eyes belong to one single human body. We were not meant to function without one another. We were made to work in harmony, and if we don't, the body grows ill and feeble.

Our culture has a wonderful emphasis on personal responsibility and individual freedom. It has generated unparalleled liberty, opportunity and prosperity. But we can tip so far into individualism that we lose a Biblical view of what it means to be a person in Christ. Jesus shared, and shares, a common humanity with us so that we can know the oneness of our shared humanity in him. He calls a multitude to himself to be his body, inseparably joined to him and one another into eternity.

Our passage from Romans depicts a body with all its members—organs, limbs, bones, ligaments--held together by the intelligence and communication of its brain which makes it all work together properly. Christ Jesus is the head of the church. We are the members of his body, each with different functions, each unable to exist independently, each uniquely needed. The body grows in health as, whatever our individual role, we each speak the truth in love and build each other up. Love makes the body healthy!

That *spirituality* of our interconnectedness in Christ directs us to work out its *practicality*. We live our individual distinctiveness in concord with other believers. Paul writes with piercingly simple profundity. A body has many parts. Each one is

needed. A body won't work if somehow, absurdly, the hand starts complaining it wants to be an eye. Or if the nose disdains the feet that carry the body. Within our shared life in Christ, we need each other's unique contributions, and even each others' different, sometimes difficult backgrounds.

Paul encourages the believers in Rome to run in their lanes. Don't try to be everything. If you love to serve, then be encouraged that setting up chairs and tables, or changing diapers, or handing out palms and bulletins is crucial work—church doesn't work without it. But if you're a teacher, study hard and use any opportunity to pass along the faith by sharing the Word--whether it's teaching in the So Loved nursery, the confirmation class or substituting for Ryan Dickerson. Some people are really good at making financial gifts. That's not less spiritual if it's your calling. You're keeping the lights burning and launching ministries all at once. You're the fuel we run on. Or perhaps you are an encourager. It's quite a gift to be someone that others love to see coming. They know you're going to smile and offer not complaint but appreciation. You notice people and tell them good things you notice. That's also fuel we run on. Some of you ooze with mercy. You might want to mentor a child or take communion to the homebound; you might love hurricane relief or making hygiene bags for prisoners. It's hard work that succeeds through continuity, so do each act cheerfully. It all matters. If you lead, don't stop paying attention. Your gifts get people going in the right direction. Don't get distracted or look for something new. This work matters. Every one of these gifts Paul names gives energy to the whole body. It takes all of us, each of us and all of us. Isn't that the best?

Of course, the early Christian congregations had to deal with different ethnicities, different prior religions, and different social/economic levels. No doubt these believers came from different kinds of families with different styles of relating. Our histories come into play when we interact with others, especially when we get stressed or threatened. Plus, new believers were continually joining their number. People with zero knowledge of the Scriptures had to be brought along, often to the annoyance of longer time believers who wanted to “get on with it.”

So Paul reminds them not to think more highly of themselves as they ought, nor less of themselves than they ought. We need sober judgment. We look at each other first of all as being beloved of God, relocated into Christ and sharers of the same Spirit. We are, each and all, on our way to glory. Your neighbors in church will one day outshine an angel. Might as well be nice to them now!

This, in turn, leads to shared emotions with each other. “Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection...Be patient in tribulation....Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep.” Paul told the Corinthians that “If one suffers...all suffer...if one is honored, all rejoice...” That’s the way family members feel about each other. It’s a profound freedom from self-only focus. We know that a broken toe can make our whole body ache; the day our back stops hurting gives our whole body energy. Paul urges us to grow into the awareness, until we feel it, of the interconnectedness of Christ’s body.

And that of course makes each of us vulnerable. Loving deeply opens you to being hurt. Giving your time and your heart makes disappointment likely. Feeling what others feel means getting exhausted from caring. Looking out for each other leaves less time for yourself. Yep. Yep, yep, yep. Love is messy business. That’s why I love this quote from C. S. Lewis:

There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell (C.S. Lewis *The Four Loves* New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960, p. 169).

We were made for love. We enter the world in dependent relationship upon our parents. No infant would make it a day without care from other humans. As we grow, we gain a measure of independence. We can feed and dress ourselves. We can endure sleeping alone or working on a task alone. But we ever remain *interdependent*.

That, in fact, is why we get so hurt by others. We require connection: we were made needing the nurture of love, tenderness, regard, admiration, forgiveness, expectation, inspiration and trust. Inevitably, our young hearts get bruised when the people around us enact the reality of being fallen human beings. They let us down. Sometimes they crush us. Some get so wounded that the soft heart becomes hard. We close off connection to others, even though we crave it, because we want

to protect our damaged heart from further wounding. We learn strategies and habits that may not be healthy, but seem to offer us some safety. Ultimately, these very defenses keep us from receiving the love we crave and from fulfilling our mission, our calling, to be givers of love to others.

When we discover that we are *in Christ*, we get connected to the healing source. Jesus tends our wounds by the power of his Spirit and the ministrations of fellow Christians. Over time, deep hurts can be forgiven. Hearts can be mended. We awaken to the call to love.

But it is never without risk. As Lewis notes, “to love at all is to be vulnerable.” We’re summoned back into the fray of human relationships. The alternative is not protection, it is isolation that eventually becomes damnation. As W.H. Auden wrote, “We must love one another or die.” Christ frees us and demands from us a life of risking, healing love.

Of course this takes work. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his famous book on *Life Together*: “God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction.”

I love Bonhoeffer’s honesty. If I look at my fellow Christians outside of their being in Christ, they appear “only a nuisance and an affliction” to me! But if I see them included in Christ, they can be a joy. I see them as particularly created and beloved. God is doing a great work in these my brothers and sisters. Jesus has called each one specifically into himself. Jesus bore the burden of their sins. Jesus bears the burden of their particular stubbornness, favorite manipulations, besetting sins and destructive strategies of protection. He did not and does not consider us too heavy to endure. Rather he remains with us, working in us to the end. As Paul wrote, “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion” (Phil. 1:6).

This Holy Week, which brothers and sisters are you especially called to view as in Christ today, praying for them so that they pass from being a nuisance to being a joy, from being a burden to being a gift? I invite us as one gathered congregation to do that right now. I’m going to pray, and there will be a moment when you can in your own mind and heart insert the names of someone you feel called to pray for. Would you specifically lift up two or three of these? Call their

names aloud before Christ. Tell him you know that they belong to him, that he has called them and is working in them. Ask him to give you a glimpse of how glorious they will be when he completes them. Tell Jesus that each one is a joy, and that you accept the burden of loving them now.

Lord Jesus, how patient you were with those you met!
How kind you are to listen to me.
Surely if you can bear the burden of me indefinitely,
I can take a moment to bear with others today.
I begin with prayer.

For _____. Ah, Lord, you know I struggle.
I see her/him as only needing, as only draining.
Forgive me.
You have called her/him to be your own.
You have called us to each other.
I cannot be in heaven without her/him.
For heaven is you, and we are members
Of your one body.
Thank you for what s/he does in your body.
Be at work in this life today and thank you,
Especially, for this one. Amen.