

01/09/2022 WORSHIP SERVICE

WELCOME – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Good morning! It was good to be safe, at home last week when the temperatures were so brutally cold and now it's good to be back together again this morning – happy New Year! Just a week belated. Welcome to all, here, in-person or zooming in. The beautiful flowers this morning were offered by the Boese family after the service for Art yesterday.

Pastor Caleb and Beth have been home this week with both Austin and Josiah having tested positive for covid, but gratefully, so far they both seem to have very mild symptoms. So Caleb has recorded his sermon and we'll be hearing from him later.

He'll be starting a three-part sermon series this morning that we hope will help us focus on questions around The Church. As we begin this new calendar year and acknowledge the changes that our congregation (and many others) have experienced in the last couple of years, we thought it might be helpful to have some intentional and focused conversations. If you look in your bulletin on the third page, at the bottom, you'll find an announcement that relates to this. We've recently formed what we're calling a "vision team" - Matt Voth, Laura Unrau, Kris Schmucker and Myron Schmidt. We've invited these folks to help us think about ways to involve and engage ALL of the congregation in asking some big-picture questions – What does it mean to be the church in this time and place? What is our common understanding when we say Christ is the head of the church? For now, we'd like to offer some discussion questions for Sunday school classes that will follow the sermon series. Alexanderwohl is OUR congregation; we're looking forward to hearing and discussing our common understandings of how to be church together.

Are there other announcements?

Call to Worship – from I Peter, number 381 in the VT book. I'll read light print, you read bold.

Leader: As you come to Christ, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to God –

People: you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house

Leader: to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

People: You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession,

Leader: that you may declare the praises of the one who called you out of gloom into a marvelous hope.

People: Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people.

INVOCATION – O God, we claim and proclaim that we ARE your people. And you, our God, are here with us as we worship, as we work, as we learn and dream and move through this life

– you are with us. Bless this time of worship. May it bring joy to your hearing and sustenance to our souls. Amen.

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS

Leona Schroeder was transferred to Mercy Hospital in Moundridge on Friday afternoon (after the bulletin was printed) where she is receiving skilled nursing care as well as important therapeutic care, physical therapy, respiratory therapy – to help her regain some strength. She has an important and long-awaited apt. tomorrow with a cardiac specialist.

Dear God, we thank you for your good gifts. We are grateful for the gift of creation – the planet on which we live, the solar system, the galaxy and beyond. It boggles our minds to try to grasp the complexity and the beauty of its vastness. We acknowledge you as Creator and lover of all that you've created. We recognize that you have invited us humans to tend and care for this garden, this planet – what a humbling invitation! We need your help and your wisdom to do it justice.

We thank you, God, for the gift of life from beginning to end. We thank you for baby Ezekiel, being formed in Karis' womb. We thank you for the doctors who bring the know-how that is needed to bring this life to fruition. Be with them, with Karis and Joel and little Jackson as they trust in your love through this process.

We thank you for the life of Art Boese, for the celebration of his life that we had here yesterday. Continue to be with Ann and his family as they grieve his loss.

We thank you for the life of Elizabeth Unruh, mother of Judy Goertzen. We are grateful, God, that Liz was able to be present with her family to celebrate Christmas, and for these precious past six weeks when she was closer, here at Kidron-Bethel. Be with Judy and her family also as they celebrate and grieve.

We thank you, God, for the care that Leona received at the NMC, and for the space that finally opened for her at Moundridge. We pray for her continued care and well-being as she sees this specialist tomorrow. We trust that your Spirit is surrounding her, upholding her, giving her – and Norman – what they both need through this difficult time.

O God, we continue to pray for doctors, nurses, all medical personnel who continue to offer expertise and care in spite of their own exhaustion and frustrations. In the mysterious ways that you work, God, we pray for resolution to the current crisis in our health systems. We pray for perseverance and tenacity; and we also pray for creativity, new and different ways of seeing and doing things, ways that break down the systems of greed and hubris and allow genuine compassion and care to be prioritized.

We pray for Caleb and Beth, for Austin and Josiah as they continue to quarantine and recover. Give them patience and energy and restore them to full health. Be with others we know who may be sick with covid or other illnesses. Bring health and restoration.

We pray for your faithful followers, God – those who try to fashion their lives after the life and teachings of Jesus. Grant clear-eyed vision, wisdom, commitment and courage to reflect the light of Jesus into our world. We pray for Alexanderwohl as we enter this time of reviewing, renewing, re-focusing, re-remembering who you have called us to be. Guide our discussions. Help us to listen well, to you and to one another. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

1/9/22 WHAT IS THE CHURCH? – PASTOR CALEB

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Good morning. I'm joining you all remotely as both of our boys have tested positive for Covid, just as we returned from South Dakota. I'm sorry to not be seeing you in-person this week.

As we find our way to a new (and ever changing) normal with Covid, we pastors felt it was important in this new year to really take stock of who we are as a congregation and who God is calling us to be. We hope our Anabaptist Essentials worship series from last fall laid a little bit of groundwork for this discernment. We also acknowledge some losses -- some folks that attended before the pandemic and not anymore. We know some of those involved in leadership roles are feeling weary. So it seems like an important time to dream, and ask what we might re-envision, let go of, or experiment with.

We've formed the vision team with Laura, Myron, Matt, and Kris to meet regularly for conversation and study on questions like "What is the church?" "What does it mean for Jesus to be the head of our church?" and "Who is God calling us to be at Alexanderwohl?" Our goal is not to make big plans or decisions on behalf of the church but to expand the conversation, listen to the congregation, reflect back what we hear, and ultimately propose action steps as experiments for the congregation.

You've heard about an opportunity for those of you who regularly meet with a SS class to have a conversation about what it means to be church together following our current worship series. We hope this will be a way to go deeper looking at different biblical passages and learning from each others' insights.

There is a lot that could be said, and no time to say it all. There is more than one good way to answer the question "What is the church?"

We could start with the word "church" itself. The same word used by the New Testament writers meant "assembly" in the secular world -- something like a townhall meeting or legislative session where laws were made. In the Old Testament times, Israelites met at the temple as "assemblies." By using this word for church, early Christians saw themselves as continuing to meet with others who together formed God's people. They also saw themselves meeting not under the authority of Rome or allegiance to Caesar, but under the authority of Jesus Christ.

So one way to answer is that the church is simply a gathering or assembly of people who call Jesus "Lord."

David Fitch answers the question like this: "The church is a community of practices that join people together in their submission to Jesus as Lord." Practices are any shared activities that connect us to the presence of Christ and remind us of who we are. There is no one definitive list of practices, and they may vary a little from congregation to congregation. But key regular practices for Christians include the Lord's supper, forgiveness and reconciliation, being with children and people on the margins, and prayer.

BODY OF CHRIST

As I looked for a passage from the Bible to go deeper with this question, I kept coming back to 1 Corinthians 12. It only mentions the word church once, but it has a clear enough answer to the question "What is the church?" The church is the body of Christ.

That's such a common phrase we use, we don't think about what that even means.

From an early age we learn that we have bodies – and that we *are* bodies. Our two-year-old enjoys identifying parts of his body. Our four-year-old is at the age of asking questions about the inner workings of his body. He has lots of questions, like “how does your body turn food into poop?” We got him a book that hopefully will help with these.

"Body of Christ" compares the people who gather in Jesus' name to a single body like the physical bodies we are intimately familiar with.

“Body of Christ” isn’t the only picture of the church in the New Testament. Paul also speaks of the church as a building or new temple built on the foundation of Jesus, or as a field.

Paul wasn’t being so original by comparing a social group as a body. That was actually very common in ancient writings.

But usually the point was to justify some members having more power and privilege than others. For example, there’s a story of a Roman Senator who tried to talk down a mass of revolting common people by arguing that in a body it is right for all the food to go to the belly, for it is the belly that distributes the nutrition where it needs to go. Don’t try to revolt against the belly, because it won’t go well for you.

Paul compares the church to a body to make the opposite point. Every part of the body is important and needed.

Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth addressed the pastoral problem of some members considering themselves better than the rest, whether it’s because they had more money, more social status, gave more to the church, or had the most important spiritual gifts. It was a divided church.

Corinth had a reputation for being a competitive city. Business dealings were cut-throat. People competed for money, social standing, and honor. Most people, including in the church, were poor and struggling to get by – slaves, ex-slaves, or freeborn peasants.

All that competing for the best spots infected the church. Distinctions of slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female added fault lines in the church. Paul speaks at length about spiritual gifts to show the Corinthians believers that the important thing is to build up the church, not to show yourself to be better. Love is the most important thing of all.

This is the context where Paul says: *“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.”*

This body is one, in spite of the differences between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female that mattered greatly in the world. In spite of the different roles and gifts of apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, helpers, those who speak in tongues, and those who interpret.

How would it work if the whole body were an eye? Or a giant ear? How would you get around if you didn't have feet? Elsewhere Paul has addressed people who think too highly of themselves. Here Paul encourages those who wish they were other than who they are. It's very painful when we internalize messages that cause us to devalue ourselves, our gifts, and our attributes.

In greatly stratified Corinth, "honor" was the measure of your status. The more important you were, the greater honor you had. If you stepped out of line, you brought shame on yourself or your family.

Those who were stuck at the bottom like slaves and most women risked being shamed if they dared having a voice.

But in the body of Christ, things are different. What body part can you possibly ignore? I've always tended to not care for my feet very well. Seasons of plantar fasciitis along with my enjoyment of running have taught me not only to not take my feet for granted, but to appreciate the incredible design of the human foot.

In our bodies, the parts that seem insignificant are very much needed. Sometimes it takes a medical issue to have a full appreciation of that body part.

Likewise, the parts that are unpresentable to show in public we give greater care to in our clothing. Unlike the outside culture, God has given greater honor to the one lacking it, so that there might be no division.

The church needs to embody a different kind of culture where the importance and value of each person is affirmed.

If one part *suffers*, all parts suffer with it. We know how it is to have pain in one part of the body and *you* hurt, simply because that body part hurts.

Covid tests this principle, especially when we are at a point where Covid represents less of a threat to some than others. People who are immunocompromised, those who need medical care, and those working in stressful health care settings can feel forgotten and ignored based on how our society has chosen to behave.

My cousin Jacob was in a serious motorcycle accident over a year ago in which he had extensive burns. The long recovery in the burn unit and physical therapy to learn to use his body again required resilience, perseverance, and positive energy like never before. We had the privilege of seeing him this summer, and I was struck by the transformed outlook he has on life.

All the fingers of one of his non-dominant hand had to be amputated, and some of the fingers of his dominant hand. Those losses will become a part of who he is. He is still a whole person. He is able to continue to live without those fingers, but will never forget their absence.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE BODY WITH CHRIST

Most of us assume “body of Christ” is just a metaphor or comparison. It’s like saying you’re “wise as an owl,” but of course you’re not really an owl.

The body of Christ is more than a metaphor. It just may be that Paul really means to say all those who are baptized into Christ and receive the Spirit really become part of Christ’s “body.”

The risen Jesus no longer walks the earth as a man, but is present on earth, has a “body,” through the church. This is why the whole thing starts out with baptism. Baptism is the initiation. Then Paul says “we were given the one Spirit to drink” – whether that happens at baptism or some other moment.

This is how you become part of the body of Christ that is the visible presence of Christ in the world today. This is why verse 12 says, “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.” We might have expected: “Just as a body has many parts, so it is with the church.

What’s happening is Paul identifies the church as a whole with the presence of Christ in the world. Christ is to live in us. For Paul, the church is not just an institution but an organic body connected to Christ.

Through our spiritual connection to Christ we become part “of Christ,” our small and sinful selves dying with him in order to be raised as transformed, resurrected people with him.

What this can only mean is that church is God’s plan for continuing the ministry that Jesus started. That’s kind of humbling to think about, because that doesn’t sound easy.

What does Jesus want us to do? The same kinds of things we see Jesus do in the Gospels (well, maybe without pressure to do all the miracles). Crossing boundaries, living by Jesus’ teachings, playing a healing role in the lives that we touch, casting a vision for the upside-down kingdom of God.

If that sounds very ambitious, maybe it helps to say that no single person can do what Jesus did. It’s all of us together in this church and anywhere people are joined in Jesus’ name. Each of us has a gift or gifts to participate in the ministry of Christ in our community and world today.

In the words of David Fitch, our job is to commit together not necessarily to sustaining programs, but “to a whole way of life centered on Jesus.”¹

What makes a “gift” a “spiritual gift” is not whether it’s an impressive talent nor whether it’s somehow “supernatural,” but that you offer it from a call from the Spirit, tested in the church, and you offer it for the sake of the whole.

The way Paul speaks of it, there isn’t some special requirement to become the “body of Christ.” Simply through our faith in Jesus, we already are the body of Christ. Now we have to just live and relate to one another like we believe it.

¹ David Fitch, *What is the Church and Why Does it Exist?* Herald Press, 2021

Believe you as an individual have a place. You are needed. You are not inferior.

GOALS FOR THE SERIES

As we continue in this series, that will include *why church?* (what is the point?) and *how will we be a church?*, I have a couple of intentions.

First is to not water-down or reduce or cheapen the biblical vision of what the church is and called to be.

But secondly, I don't want to cast such a high or lofty vision that we are disqualified as a congregation for where we fall short. The whole biblical story is about God working with people who fell short.

As the verses says in Deuteronomy (30:12-14), "It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, 'Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?' ...No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it."

Third, we don't want to be dishonest by mischaracterizing ourselves in lofty ways that aren't true to our reality.

In short, we want to be clear about the biblical vision of the church, without reducing it to how churches tend to behave.

We need to believe we are a real church in spite of shortcomings. We are a beautiful community where many of you have lived out your lives supported in fellowship, prayer, faith and discipleship. God's grace is sufficient as we challenge ourselves with a greater vision.

CONCLUSION

- We are the body of Christ, not by virtue of reaching a certain bar, but by being baptized into this body and open to being filled by the Holy Spirit

We already *are* this body – we have to believe that.

- Our mission is to continue the ministry that Jesus began in his years on earth.
- The church is not just an organization with programs, but a people committed together to a whole way of life centered on Jesus.

We learn this way of life through our shared practices. To the extent that we do this, we become an attractive community for others to join.