

## Celebrating Life as the Body of Christ

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A week of prayer for the church and its unity may not seem like much to the parishioner in the pew, but for the pastor this is a pretty big deal. It's important because it gets us thinking about the church, what it is and who we are. It gets us thinking about our mission in the world and our purpose in life. Rick Warren, this week's edition of *America's Preacher*, hit a homerun a decade ago with his twin hits, *The Purpose Driven Life* and its predecessor, *The Purpose Driven Church*. Both books were about pursuing our purpose in life with passion. Both books affirmed that we do, in fact, have a purpose in life, a purpose bestowed by a God who loves us and calls us to join in the work of saving the unsaved by proclaiming Christ as Savior and Lord. There are many ways of understanding the mission of the church. Saver of souls is one way of understanding the church's mission. Bishop John A.T. Robinson, an important figure in the Church of England in the last century, wrote a book that never made it out of the park, nor even out of many libraries anywhere, but one that I found as a diligent doctoral student at Notre Dame, entitled *The Body of Christ*, which was written in 1952. Bishop Robinson was describing the Apostle Paul's understanding of the church, and Paul used the image of a body, not as a symbol, nor merely as a metaphor, but quite literally and graphically as a physical and spiritual body re-presenting of Christ's life and presence in the world.

It is helpful to remember that Hebrew thinking had a very earthy understanding of the body as flesh and blood drawn from the dust of the earth, and a very well developed sense of corporate identity, where persons were members of a community first, and individuals second. Israel was the community that gave Jews their identity, their purpose, and their mission in the world. Jesus understood this mission, embraced it with his baptism, embodied it during his ministry, and then recreated a new community, promising new life, life in abundance, life filled full with meaning and purpose and mission for those called to live in his name, empowered by his Holy Spirit, as membranes in the Body of Christ, which we call the church. This is an understanding of the church that I find most impressive, one that invites us to understand ourselves in a very literal sense to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, responding to God's call to be a servant of peace, a worker for justice, struggling with the poor, sharing their suffering with understanding and compassion. This is the servant we hear about in Isaiah's servant songs, songs from which God Himself quoted at Jesus' Baptism, when we heard those memorable words resounding from the heavens, "*Thou art my beloved Son; with Thee, I am well pleased.*" (Mark 1:11, quoting from Isaiah 42:1)

The Adult Sunday School Class has been a faithful crew of real troopers in devoting more than three months to discussions of Pastor Steven Goodwin's book aimed at taking on patterns of decline and turning them around into strategies that will help us grow.

Before that, we engaged the counsel of Pastor Rick Warren, who also helped us think about turnaround strategies for getting the church to grow. Both Pastors have enjoyed considerable success in this regard, and both books offered good, sound, and practical advice in focusing on church growth. But I've got to tell you that growth is always, at best, a secondary issue. First, we've got to know what the church is. We've got to know what the church does. What is our mission? Why are we here? What is our purpose for existing, our calling in life? I got to thinking more about this on Wednesday, when Mabel Kolarik was leading us through our weekly Bible study, which asked what it is we might say about our church when asking a neighbor or friend to *come and see* something we know they'll like, namely, life at Zion. At one level, I'm sure you can see through the question as inviting us to get involved in recruitment and growth. But I saw it as an invitation to think about what God is doing through Zion. In particular, I thought about that incredible overview of benevolence found in January's edition of *The Zion Herald*.

In one page, page 5, to be exact, I saw a church functioning like a family. I saw people reaching out to folks in need through the *Souper Bowl*, helping families in northeast Ohio with shoes and toys, along with coats and clothing. I saw a church family helping friends and members in little ways, say, with monthly rent and emergency cash, and in big ways, too, by letting one of our own know that we were going to be walking together all the way through rehab to full recovery. I saw support for the wider community with our support for the *Food Pantry & Clothing Closet*, with our sending yet another group of youth and adults to the Gulf Coast with a desire to *Help New Orleans Heal*, and with our faithful support of the *Northeastern Ohio Synod* and the *ELCA*. A total of fifty-five thousand, two-hundred and eighty-two dollars was drawn from your pockets to help folks in the family, in the community, down south in New Orleans, and around the world! And it wasn't just dollars. It was your time, your faithful commitment, your going about the business of figuring out ways to grow in love and service by grace. That's what this thing we call the church is all about. It's about the joy of being used by God to do incredible things. (Zion's 2008 Benevolence Overview is found on the back of this sermon.)

I look at this past year, and I marvel at what you have accomplished. I look around the Sanctuary, and I admire the incredible things you've accomplished, with so many beautiful improvements to this place where we worship, along with much needed improvements to this building, to our restrooms, and to the heating and air-conditioning system. I know that it's not always or entirely exciting; but it is amazing, because it's the love of God alive among us, the love of God alive within us. Sure, I know for some that it feels more like exhaustion than the Holy Spirit; but praise God for the camaraderie we've enjoyed, the ministry we've done, the music we've made, the worship we've offered, the love we've shared, the grace that's ours, and the glory that's God's!

This story of the church, and everything that follows, all begins with our Gospel text. "The time has come. The kingdom is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel." Jesus calls Andrew and Peter, and then James and John. They hear the call, and follow. Matthew

will talk about the Rock upon which Jesus will build the church (Matthew 16), and the Great Commission, which will define its mission in the world (Matthew 28). Luke will talk about our call to service with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10). John will talk about the Little Pentecost and the presence of the Spirit empowering us to turn God's grace into the gift of forgiveness (John 21). Paul's vision of the church as the Body of Christ may come later in the New Testament (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians), but it was among the earliest understandings that Christians embraced in thinking about the work of the church and its unity: many gifts, one call; a variety of ministries, all serving the same Lord. Last week we sang a number of hymns that celebrated our hope for Christian unity (*The Church's One Foundation; Bind Us Together, Lord; One Bread, One Body*); but one hymn, in particular, one that Darlene Milavickas has made our favorite, brought all of these various visions together.

*We all are one in mission. We all are one in call.  
Our varied gifts united by Christ the Lord of all.  
A single great commission compels us from above  
to plan and work together that all may know Christ's love.*

*We all are called to service, to witness in God's name.  
Our ministries are different; our purpose is the same –  
to touch the lives of others with God's surprising grace,  
so every folk and nation may feel God's warm embrace.*

*So let us be united, and let our song be heard,  
and let us be a vessel for God's redeeming Word.  
We all are one in mission. We all are one in call;  
our varied gifts united by Christ the Lord of all.*

What better way to mark this week of prayer for the unity of Christ's body than to embody in our life as a congregation the fullness of ministry that proclaims the Good News of the Gospel alive among us! You know, in concluding I've got to confess that I learned some things in looking back on Zion's witness of love and life in ministry in 2008. Rick Warren has a great line in *The Purpose Driven Church*, namely, that living organisms, like plants, or churches, are either growing or dying. That's true only if your sole measure of living is growing. Steven Goodwin said the same kind of thing when he observed that churches either stop declining or they die. Being alive in Christ is not a *paint-by-numbers* kind of project. It's about coming alive in mission. It's about growing in love and service. It's about seeing generosity in spirit and in giving flourish. When Mabel asked us what someone would see when invited to join us at Zion, it is clear to me they would see a community engaged by God's call to service. They would see love in action. They would see people enjoying the friendships that grow as we share in the work of the church. They would see what it means to say *YES* to following in the steps of a Lord who is – indeed and in Spirit – walking with us every step of the way, as we struggle and strive to live our lives ... as best we can ... in Jesus' name. Amen.