

A Saving Transplant

Ephesians 4:1-16

A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Many people think that going to church is like going to the dentist. It's one of those things you should do, but don't necessarily want to do.

But there's a big difference between the two. Some parents say to their children: "You are to go to church with us as long as you live in our house. When you're on your own, you can decide what to do." But you would never say that about your teeth.

Another way that people think of church is like a social group one enjoys but, in a take-it-or-leave-it sort of way.

The message of the text for today is a hard one: Outside of the church there is no salvation. Church is serious business, because without the church, there is no salvation.

The next question is: Where is the church? Again, people make up their own idea of the church, just as they make up their own idea of salvation.

How does Scripture describe this? The last few Sundays we've had texts from the Letter to the Ephesians. It says there that God has a plan that is being realized. This is not a new plan. Rather, God has prepared it before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Though God's purpose was operative in the past, it was shrouded in mystery. Now it is revealed in Christ. What was hidden is now revealed.

One becomes "in Christ" through Baptism. The church is like a family into which we are adopted. Our place in the grand plan is already secured by his action in Christ. The Lord has "has blessed us" (1:3); "he chose us" (1:4). In Baptism we are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit" (1:13) and have the downpayment (1:14) of our full inheritance to come. As it says in Romans 8 and Galatians 4, we are all adopted sons and daughters.

Now we look at what is he doing in the church, and where is the church?

In Luther's Small Catechism his explanation for the Third Article of the Creed begins like this: "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith" That means he's done it and he's made me his own. Then it goes on: ". . . just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." It's in the church this happens.

When Luther wrote his Small Catechism, was he just making stuff up? No, all that Luther is doing here is following the Book of Ephesians. His Small Catechism is not made up out of his own head. He is simply following the way the Bible goes.

Then in this text in Ephesians 4:3-5 it says "one body, one Lord." It then goes on to talk about the church as the body of Christ. We say these are all metaphors, pictures, ways of speaking, but it's really the case that the church **is** the body of Christ.

We have to go back to the baseline. It's spelled out in John 1:14: "The Word became flesh." God became truly human. That's not a way of speaking, not a metaphor, not a general idea. People make it up to be that way, but this is definitely in the Gospel of John. God truly became human died and rose again. He became just like us and remains like us.

When we turn then to Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creature," we see how we are a new creation in Christ. His body continues. He doesn't become something else after the Ascension. He continues to be truly human and truly divine. We are in him, not as a metaphor, but as that which continues. This is stated variously about the body, for example in 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. . . ." Then in 1 Corinthians 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

The church is the body. This means there is no private religion, no individual Christianity, no Christianity on my own, by myself. The Small Catechism says (paraphrase): "I cannot believe, the Holy Spirit calls me through the Gospel." It comes to me in the preaching and the sacraments, the proclaiming of the Word, that is, the proclaiming of Christ.

In the Augsburg Confession, Article 7 it says: "The church is where the Gospel is proclaimed purely, the sacraments are celebrated according to that gospel." That raises the question of living in the Christian faith and the Christian church. What is it like?

It is like receiving a transplant. If you have an organ transplant, then for the rest of your life, you have to go to get checked out, and you have to have anti-rejection drugs. You have to be under the care of the clinic.

It's not possible for you to say after a transplant: "You know, I feel O.K. I think I'll just skip the medicine for a few weeks, and I'll skip my regular check-ups. I feel fine. I'll come back to the clinic when it's convenient, when I feel I need it, but I don't need this regular check-up business because I can make it on my own."

If you were to say and do that, you'd be done. And there are among us, as far as Christianity is concerned, the walking dead. Loosely called zombies. They are those who say: "I'm Christian, but I don't need to be connected to a body." When you're baptized, you are part of the body.

The other example is marriage. For some people Christianity is like going to the wedding but after the wedding one spouse says to the other: "By the way I'm leaving for a month to go to the Caribbean with my secretary." That kind of person doesn't get it.

Many people incorrectly assume that everyone is saved no matter what; everything is good, so what does any of this church business really matter? They are like Catherine the Great of Russia. In the late Eighteenth Century, she ruled Russia and made big policy mistakes causing famines, starvation, and fear of famines. She was the one who said (paraphrase): "I will be an autocrat, that's my trade. It doesn't matter what I do, God has to forgive me, that's his nature." That perspective, of course, is presuming on God and making up one's own religion. But, of course, that's not the way it works.

What does it say here in Scripture? In the Gospel lesson for today, it says that after the feeding of the 5,000, the Jews came seeking Jesus and said (paraphrase: "What is all this about? . . . Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness" (John 6:31), and Jesus says to them: "It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world" (John 6:32-33). Then in John 6:35, Jesus says: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." Again, is this just a metaphor?

No, it comes back to the incarnation itself. If the incarnation is just a general idea, then you can manipulate it anyway you want. But, if the incarnation is as we confess in the Creed, that means that the church **is** the body of Christ. In the church through the hearing of the Word who "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) and the celebrating of his sacraments, there is life, as it says in John 6, life in him forever. Amen.