

Unwavering Decency

January 26, 2025

Our Purpose

Years ago, I heard the story of an early New England congregation that would have been one of our forebearers in the faith. They were a modest and frugal bunch, not given to lots of frills and extras. But they quickly learned after building their meeting house that the church got very, very cold in the winter. Being Congregationalists, they debated and debated whether or not to take up a collection to buy a wood stove. Excuse the pun, but the debates were heated. There were deeply entrenched views on both sides, one saying that comfort in church on Sunday morning would allow worshippers to focus better, and therefore wasn't really a luxury at all, the other saying that buying an expensive wood stove was unnecessary and a sin and that they were made of sterner stuff than that.

The debate went on for months and months, until one January day, a wealthy congregant gifted the church with a wood stove. The anti-stove faction was not pleased, but acquiesced. It ended up being installed in the depths of winter, and the next Sunday, when the pro-stove faction arrived, they immediately took their coats off, and were bright eyed and attentive, murmuring about what a blessing it was to be able to feel good and therefore be able to pay attention. The anti-stove crowd also took their coats off, and were murmuring as well, though they were talking about how uncomfortably hot they were, and that the wood stove was actually a distraction from their worship. At the end of the service the Pastor once again thanked the family whose generosity made the wood stove possible, and then concluded with, "and next week, we'll even light it."

It's a cute story that gets at one of the reasons folks often cite for not being part of a church community; church folks can tend to be pretty self-righteous and often hypocritical.

Two weeks ago, I asked if you could tell from your interactions with someone at work or at school or in your neighborhood whether they were baptized. As we celebrate our Annual Meeting Sunday today, I ask the question from a slightly different angle—can you tell whether someone is a churchgoer?

What do you make of my assertion that you should be able to tell? Not necessarily because THEY'VE told you. I'm not suggesting you ask people whether they're saved or tell them that you are. But what if the ways of Jesus were so much a part of who we are that they just ooze out of us? What if our neighbors and classmates and coworkers knew that we were going to be honest and fair right out of the gate because that's just who we are? What if anyone who's ever spent any amount of time with us knew that we would stand up for the underdog and would fight for justice because that's what radiates out from a churchgoer? What if being merciful and seeking others' healing and wholeness was expected? What if, by virtue of steeping ourselves in stories of Jesus and the ways of God and God's people a couple of hours a week, people could count on us to be unwaveringly decent?

The Scriptures

I know it's been a hard week out there. The chaos of our world is churning. And in the midst of that, we hear two powerful messages in our scriptures today. First, in our passage from the First Letter to the Corinthians, we read that we are all members of Christ's body. Paul then goes into this magnificent metaphor that highlights that while we are all different we all belong.

Talk about a message the world needs today! What may be even more important right now, though, is how he talks about how the more vulnerable parts of the body are to be even more highly revered. In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul was writing to a community divided. They had widely differing views of how to live their faith. In our passage for today, Paul tells them that when we understand ourselves to be the Body of Christ, we are to value diversity and protect the vulnerable. In fact, Paul is adamant, we cannot say to one part of the body, “I have no need of you.”

There’s a phrase toward the beginning of this passage that is often overlooked because the “many parts / one body” image is so strong, and that is in verse 13 where Paul writes, “we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” This is particularly interesting because Paul is saying it doesn’t matter how you came to the faith, how you came to following Jesus, whether you were born into the same tradition as he was or whether all of this is foreign to you, AND it doesn’t matter what you bring to the table, all are valued, cherished, indeed critical, to the full functioning of the body.

Then there’s our Gospel. The fact that we read these two passages together is already so powerful, but then add to that the fact that once every three years we read them on Annual Meeting Sunday—it’s just sublime. If our passage from Corinthians guides us in the importance of community and connectedness and diversity and care for one another, our Gospel is a mandate for what that care should look like.

Go ahead and turn to page 61 in the New Testament of the Bibles in your pews. The indented section, 4:18-19, the portion that Jesus reads from the Prophet Isaiah, is his purpose statement. There is no clearer articulation in the Gospels of what Jesus was about, what he came to do.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor,
has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Let’s go over that with a fine-tooth comb. In saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus is attributing both his power and his agenda to the Spirit. This healing and redeeming and proclaiming of Good News isn’t his idea. This has divine origin and blessing and energy. He goes on, “to bring good news to the poor.” What kind of poor? The worthy poor? The working poor? What about the lazy poor? The poor who are here legally? If you remember, just a couple of chapters earlier in Luke’s Gospel, the angel tells the shepherds that Jesus’ birth is to be good news for all people.

Jesus reads on, “God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives.” Captive from what? Perhaps this is literal, speaking of people who have been captured and are being held against their will. But along with that, Jesus is declaring it his purpose to free us from the notions and behaviors that hold us bound, the ways of being that keep us in captivity. Similarly, in Luke, Jesus’ recovery of sight for the blind is both literal and figurative. There are the stories of healing and restoration of physical blindness, but they’re always accompanied by coming to see the world and our place in it more clearly as well.

Jesus adds freeing the oppressed to what the Spirit has sent him to do, and then rounds all of this out by saying that he is to proclaim a year of the Lord's favor. Now, in the Old Testament, a year of the Lord's favor was to be a once every 50-year reset button. Debts were forgiven, slaves freed, property returned. Basically, all of the things that had advantaged some and disadvantaged others were to be neutralized and everyone got to start at "go" once again. A year of the Lord's favor was to be a society-wide do-over.

So What Do We Do With This?

Friends, these two passages, Paul's image of all of us, in all of our diversity, comprising the Body of Christ, and Jesus' declaration of his purpose in Luke 4, dovetail beautifully into what it means to be church. In Luke, Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms what he's here to do, and in First Corinthians, we're all interwoven into that work. Our church is celebrating 189 years of existence today. We're the longest continually meeting congregation in the state! And as we look back at the highlights in the life cycle of this congregation, you'll see that we've shone most brightly when we've been living these two scriptures most profoundly.

Most of you know the story that this church was a stop on the Underground Railroad. It's a source of great pride for us. Our church was on the right side of slavery...kind of. If you've read the actual story, it was just the pastor and a couple of brave souls who harbored the man and his children fleeing slavery. Doubtless others thought it was too risky politically. Some probably feared the church's reputation or reprisal. Others probably couldn't be bothered, or would have preferred the resources expended on the man and his children be utilized for the good of people closer to home.

Have you ever stopped to ask why the Underground Railroad was needed and why churches and people of faith were critical in its operation? In the absolute broadest of brushstrokes, the Underground Railroad was needed because laws, even in a free state like Wisconsin, were unjust, and a small number of people had the courage to do what was right rather than merely what was lawful. Furthermore, churches and people of faith were central to the operation of the Underground Railroad because of the two scriptures we read today and countless others like it.

We're celebrating 189 years today, and part of what we're celebrating is a long history of doing justice, even when it's scary. In the chaos of the world right now, we need to keep this touchstone. We need to hold these forebearers as inspiration. Do not obey in advance. Rather hold true to the core of the Gospel. Turn your anger into action, your fear into solidarity. The church has some pretty crucial roles to play in a society in turmoil. We are to protect the vulnerable. We are to bind up care for the wounded. And we are to work for change, work for a world that is ever closer to the reign of God here on earth for others.

But there's one more role of the church that I think is critical for us to embody right now, and that is the role the church can play in giving one another respite. Have you ever heard the joke, "When geese fly in an arrow formation, do you know why one side of the "V" is longer than the other? Because there are more geese on that side." Seriously, though, we need to take a page out of the goose playbook. You see, when geese are migrating long distances, one will take the lead, taking the brunt of the wind and creating favorable aerodynamics for the birds behind it for a while, and then when it gets tired, it falls back and another takes its place.

Friends, this journey is going to be long and arduous, and part of the role I hope this church can play for you is to keep putting someone in front, keeping us all flying, keeping us on course, as

well as providing respite when we need to fall back for a while, respite when we're exhausted. I hope this church can both be that respite as well as that reassurance that we're all pulling in the direction of Christ, even when one of us needs to fall back in order that exhaustion doesn't overcome us.

Friends, if I can be so bold, can I ask you to turn to our Gospel one more time and proclaim Luke 4:18-19 together? That was on page 61.

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He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
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As we step into our 190th year, may this be both our comfort and our commission.

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21
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