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The Inconvenience of Being a Body

Luke 4:14-21

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Introduction to Luke: When we find ourselves in the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel, we find an adult Jesus beginning his public ministry. Jesus has been born. Christmas is behind us. Now what? Anyone who has ever become a parent knows that it is impossible to go back to the way things were before the baby came. After the baby comes, everything is changed. Our lives are completely changed because we put our whole selves in the service of this small, totally dependent, stinky, adorable and beloved person. Once Jesus Christ has been born – our lives must change. Either we submit to this amazing, demanding, inconvenient, unique and beloved Jesus, or we have not become disciples and followers of Christ at all. So, what does it mean to become followers and disciples of Jesus Christ? Well, Jesus himself gives us his "mission statement" right here in Luke 4. What is Jesus about? Where is he going? What can we expect if we choose to submit ourselves to Jesus? Jesus lays it out right here.

Introduction to Corinthians: If Luke gives us Jesus' mission statement, then the Apostle Paul helps us envision what that mission statement looks like in day to day terms. When we submit ourselves to the Jesus who has come to bring good news, to bring freedom and sight and to proclaim God's favor, then this is what we can expect the journey will be like.

Following Jesus is often talked about as if it is a solo sport, something that I alone decide to do or not to do. We sing, "I have decided to follow Jesus." And then we pursue our own personal devotions, our own personal walk with Christ, our own personal salvation.

Now, our own personal choices and lives are critical, and our daily decisions are one of the clearest ways to evaluate whether or not we have "decided to follow Jesus." BUT in today's Scriptures, Jesus and then the Apostle Paul put a real stick in the spokes of a purely personal, individual religion. Jesus shows up in his home synagogue and reads from the prophet Isaiah about God's purpose in the world and then says that God's purpose is fulfilled in him. And the Apostle Paul says that our faith in Christ either ties us to Christ and the Body that is Christ in the world, or it is not a Christian faith. To decide to follow Jesus means that we decide to submit ourselves to the community, the team, the body that serves Christ as head. The Christian faith is not a solo sport, and those who try to practice it that way have missed the point.

Today is Basketball Sunday here at FLPC. I am grateful to the coaches, parents and players who have joined together under the joint sponsorship of North Trenholm Baptist and Forest Lake in order to support our community youth. I assume you know this, but just in case you haven't thought of it this way, our churches sponsor these teams because we want the youth in our churches and the community to be able to be a part of a team where the good of the whole is emphasized. We don't sponsor these teams to win more games than any other church. We sponsor these teams to remind ourselves and our children and youth of what it looks like and feels like to be part of a community where ALL are valued and given a chance to learn and to play. The strongest teams are ones in which there are players with different gifts and abilities. The defense needs the offense who needs the center, and it all works ONLY if all of the players look to the coaches for the strategy and plays. That is a critical lesson of faith to learn.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that IF we are going to call ourselves baptized Christians THEN we are – by definition – one part of a diverse and larger body – or team. This body is The Christian Church. Following Jesus Christ is NOT a solo sport. Every player practices to improve his/her own gifts and skills, but until their gifts and skills are made part of the team, the game cannot be well played. And for the game to be well played, EVERY player must consent to follow the coach. For the Church to serve God's purpose in the world, every disciple must decide to submit his/her own skills and gifts to the purpose of the head of the body – Jesus Christ. So, the first requirement to become Christ's body in the world is to acknowledge that we are inextricably bound to others who also submit to Christ whether we like them or not. And to submit to Christ means to say – to ourselves and to the world – I am not the head. I am not the lord. Christ alone is the head. Christ alone is the Lord. And the Lord has chosen to work in the world through a body made up of lots of parts.

And then, Paul confirms what we already know. There are stronger and weaker parts of this body we call Christ's Church. There are members of this Body whose gifts are immediately visible and others whose gifts are less visible, but ALL are essential and all serve the head of the Church. The Presbyterians can't say, because we are not Baptists, we are not part of the same body. And the Baptists can't say, because we are not Presbyterians we are not part of the same body. The conservatives cannot say, because we are different from the progressives, we are not part of the same body. And the progressives cannot say, because we are different from the conservatives, we are not part of the same body. Again, what determines whether or not we are part of Christ's Body the Church in the world is ONLY whether or not we recognize the authority of the Head and whether or not we are willing to follow the direction of the head and to do what the head directs. Only then can the body can function.

A member of the basketball team is a member because there is a coach, and that player determines to recognize the authority of the coach and determines to do as the coach asks. Then the team can play.

And that leads us to acknowledge that it can be frustrating and inconvenient to be a body. Bodies are amazing, resilient and frustrating and limiting. If I hurt my back or get the flu, all

parts of my body must slow down and tend to the hurt or sick parts, waiting for them to heal before the whole body can proceed.

And, unless we recognize and value ALL parts of the body, we almost always are headed for trouble or injury. So, if we focus only on losing weight without any care given to diet or exercise, we can actually kill the whole body. And if we focus only on strength without any attention given to diet, rest or our cardiovascular health, we can be certain of injury. Ignoring the needs of any part of the body can hurt the whole.

Often individual Christians will get so frustrated with the whole body that they decide they are going to “go it alone” – follow Christ all by themselves without the frustrations of having to wait on slower members, wait for hurt members to heal, or serve a purpose that doesn’t seem to showcase that individual’s gifts and strengths. The Apostle Paul says, “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.” (12:15) I get this ridiculous image in my mind of the feet hopping off down the road in one direction, while the hands crawl in another and the eyeballs roll without direction. Ridiculous. In the same way, Paul says, to think that we can follow Christ alone is ridiculous.

So, being a follower of Christ is never a solo enterprise. Being a follower of Christ requires that we submit our whole selves to the head of the Church who is Christ and that means we must be a part of a body that is made of people who are not like us. This can be frustrating, inconvenient and maddening. But, that is how God has designed us, the world and the Body of Christ in the world – the Church.

Finally, it is critical to remember that the purpose of the body is to carry out the mission of the head. Everyone who claims to be a baptized, committed follower of Jesus must carry out the mission of Jesus Christ. The body is made for action, and if Christians are not serving the mission of Christ, then we are useless to our Lord. I’d go so far as to say that the Christian Church that does not serve the purposes of the head of the body is not the Body of Christ.

And what we are to do is not unclear. We are to be those who bring good news to the world, those who work to free people from captivity and oppression and to work to allow people to see truth, light and life. We are to be a body that tells the world how much God loves every part of creation. Jesus tells us this mission over and over again. This mission is what Jesus is emphasizing when he says that the greatest commandment is that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. (Matt 22:34+, Mk 12:29; Lk 10:27; Jn 13:34)

If we are not willing to submit to this purpose, and not willing to try to figure out how to do what Jesus commands, then it really doesn’t matter how many perfect attendance pins we have or how many basketball games we win or how many members our churches have. We either do what the head commands, or we are serving some other Lord, and we should not count ourselves as members of the Body of Christ. And, if we do count ourselves as members

of the Body of Christ, then we welcome, support and value every other part that serves the purpose of the head – even when their skill, gift or passion is different from ours.

Being a part of the Body of Christ is demanding, difficult and inconvenient. It can be frustrating and it can be the most wonderful, exhilarating experience there is. It requires commitment and it requires that we recognize an authority much greater and much wiser than our own – it is the authority that came to earth in human form so long ago and who still lives and works through the body of Christ in the world that we call Church! What funny, amazing and wonderful good news. Once that baby came into the world, nothing has been the same!