

“All Baptized into One Body”

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Richard C. Allen

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The Apostle Paul was a master at bringing people together and helping them to overcome the issues that divided them. The people in the church in a place called Corinth were experts in divisiveness. They argued over most everything: which of them had the best singing voice; which of them was the best teacher; which was the best usher; which was the best preacher; which was the best deacon, and so forth. The idea of everyone coming together for a common purpose had not occurred to them! Their competitive nature had taken over!

So the Apostle Paul wrote them a pastoral letter. We just heard a portion of that letter read aloud. The theme of this letter is unity. After many illustrations and metaphors, he says to them simply: “You were all baptized into one body.” What he means is that we are all in this life of Christian discipleship together. We need each other. We rely on each other. We are interdependent. It takes everyone’s spiritual gifts to be an effective church. The storyteller is valued as much as the coffee maker. The soloist matters as much as the church school teacher. Without the ushers, no one welcomes the visitors. Without the adult advisors, the youth mission trips flounder. The one who organizes the potluck supper matters as much as the one who organizes the Joyful Noise Band.

Paul shares this vision of everyone pulling together for the common good: to strengthen the church; to make the Christian witness as effective as possible; and to set free anyone who still lived in bondage of any kind. It is a passionate letter. I commend all sixteen chapters of 1 Corinthians to your reading.

On April 16, 1963, another passionate letter was written. This one was written from the Birmingham jail by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. That letter was addressed to all the clergymen who weren't there with him, behind bars; asking them to unite with him, to stand with him, to suffer the humiliation of a jail cell with him; to come together to bear witness to what love demands of all who call themselves Christians. The letter is a rallying cry for people of faith to band themselves together to put an end to racial segregation. Like the Apostle Paul, Dr. King believed we are all in this together, all in the struggle for respect and dignity; all are needed if freedom is to be a reality. In deed, no one is truly free until everyone is free.

Dr. King, the Apostle Paul, you and I; we are all baptized into one body. That would be the body of Christ. Such that when one part of the body suffers, we all suffer together. And when one part of the body rejoices, we all rejoice with a single voice!

I was a sophomore in high school when Dr. King wrote that letter from the Birmingham jail. I was a second year student in seminary when it finally came to my attention. You can read the letter in its entirety. You can find it at the library or on-line. I found that once I had read that letter, it was always with me. Same with the Corinthian Letter. Once I had read it and digested it, I knew it would always be in my heart. There comes a time for standing together. There comes a time for valuing everyone's gifts. Paul summons us to unity. Martin summons us to unity. Both summon us to be the body of Christ in the world, a force for unity!

In my first parish out in Dupree, South Dakota, we lived in a parsonage right next door to the church. At times, that was a little too close. But at other times, it was a joy to set my sermon preparation aside and walk over to the church basement where the women would be quilting. Quilting and talking.

Typically, it would be a crazy quilt made from scraps of fabric salvaged from grandpa's pajamas or from Dorothy's skirt or from uncle's tie or from Henry's overalls or from Mary's blouse. The fabric would be set out on a quilting frame and maybe a dozen women sat around the perimeter with needle and thread and thimble. The elder women were there and middle aged women and the teenage girls were there and a few children too. I am no expert on quilts, but what I saw there is that all kinds of fabric were acceptable: cotton and wool and silk and corduroy and nylon and orlon. What I saw there is that all ages collaborating made the work efficient and effective and even joyful. For a young pastor, the quilting bee was a wonderful image of what it means to be church, what it means to be baptized into the one body, what it means to be part of a faith community where everyone counts.

There is a third letter I'd like to read aloud. I wrote this letter in early 1991, back when I used to jump on the Art Study Group bus organized by Johnnie Wasserman. It is addressed to you, to South Church.

Dear Friends,

Two weeks ago, I spent a day in New York City. I got off the bus at 125th Street, which is Martin Luther King Blvd, walked across Harlem, and headed for Union Theological School on the Upper East Side. Right at the edge of Harlem, I turned the corner at Morningside Avenue and found myself standing in front of the Church of the Master. Many years earlier, I had heard of this Presbyterian church through its founding pastor, the Rev. Dr. James Robinson. While a high school student at Williston Academy, I heard Dr. Robinson deliver a stirring sermon. To a young, impressionable sophomore, his message of courage in the struggle for racial justice left a lasting impression. Six years later, I encountered this man again. He had organized a college student work camp called Operation Crossroads Africa.

He was recruiting women and men to spend a college summer in Africa. I spent the next summer in the Sahara Desert.

When people today ask me to name the ones who influenced the course of my life, I always mention Dr. Robinson. He introduced me to the Gospel in a way that reached my heart. He introduced me to Africa in a way that got into my blood. He introduced me to a part of my inner self that I really like. So, standing in front of the Church of the Master gave me goose bumps. I walked inside, stood near the pulpit where Dr. Robinson had preached, walked past the office where he had crafted his sermons, lingered in the sanctuary where I could almost hear the hymns he loved to sing. Dr. Robinson has been gone for several years, but he was alive to me that day in New York City.

On the way out, I noticed the sign board on the street. It posted the time of service, the title of the next sermon, the name of a visiting soloist, and the current pastor's name. At the very bottom it said, "Visitors Expected." I read those last two words and smiled. Most churches publish, "Visitors Welcome." Dr. Robinson's church publishes its expectations, holds high expectations, expects much of all who associate with the Church of the Master. I departed wondering whether we at South Church are ready to move beyond welcoming people to expecting people, to expecting great things from those who associate with Christ's church in our end of town. I know I am a richer, fuller person today because Dr. Robinson expected much from me. Had he not expected so much, I doubt if I would have gained so much. Thanks Dr. Robinson, and God bless you.

The Apostle Paul expected unity in the church at Corinth. Martin Luther King expected unity throughout our great nation. I can ask for nothing less from this congregation; unity as we choose to be Christ's church in our village and in our world. For we are all baptized into one body. In the greatest of hope, Amen!