

What does it mean to be the Body of Christ in the world, for the world, for the glory of God?

She was so small and new, holding my thumb while I held her in my lap. My friend and I were sitting on the love seat in the birthing center at the hospital, admiring the baby and talking with her mom and dad. This birth was different for them, her mom was telling us. They were having so many visitors, well-wishers, gifts and help. We were encouraging them. They had done a lot of hard work to finally get to a good place. They had kids removed from their custody, spent time in and out of jail, lost friends to drugs, made difficult decisions, and completed rehab. It's a process of great effort to rebuild one's life, and they were dedicated. Our conversation came around to people who are still trapped in the drug world. I had heard a familiar last name mentioned in local news and gossip related to a shooting in our area. The baby's dad confirmed that it was a man I knew.

“He went to a house in Chauncey to buy drugs and they shot him in the head. He got back in his truck and tried to drive away, but wrecked into a tree down the street.”

I wondered aloud if he had tried to stiff his dealer. No one was sure. It was strange conversation for a delivery room. I thought about what James had written—that, “sin, when it is full-grown gives birth to death” (James 1:15). It's true. People whose lives are overrun by sin do not understand the risks they are taking and often are not long for this world.

Our talk moved on. Visitors came and went, and mom and dad explained to each new person the meaning of their little girl's name, “Christ is with us.” Christ is with them indeed. He is leading them out of sin and into hope. The baby is not the only family member starting a new life.

Christ said, “I have come that you may have life, and life to the full” (John 10:10b). This life in Christ is new and different, and it is lived together in communion with him and in communion with one another. We are many different people who have died to our old selves so that we could be resurrected together into one new body full of life. We are not just ourselves any more. We are the body of Christ.

This is a strange metaphor and truth. There are ways in which the Church is literally like the incarnate Christ, and other aspects that seem purely poetic. There is something mystical about where the literal ends and poetic begins.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This scripture describes an eternal and powerful nature who, in the same flow of narrative, self-constrains, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (v. 14). This is quite a concept to meditate upon, and many stumble over it—that the Word could become flesh. That Christ, in fact, existed bodily.

Moreover, the actions that Christ took in bodily form shocked his contemporaries. They reflected his purposes from Luke 4:18 and 19, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Luke’s gospel continues to flesh out Christ’s ministry among unexpected people. He drove out demons, touched and healed a man with leprosy; he forgave the sins of a paralyzed man in front of Pharisees, then healed him and also healed a man with a shriveled hand. He welcomed people who were hurt and overcame their pain, and offered them forgiveness. He kept the law perfectly, but taught its champions to live by love as a means to attain true perfection. He told financially secure people to eat with beggars and to be generous.

“The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone” (Luke 20:17). Christ’s way of life is the foundation on which we build our corporate lives. Being the body of Christ means, in some way, taking on Christ’s Way and purposes as our own. We in the Church are also born into the world, but like Christ, guided by the Spirit, who changes our intentions and gives us a different purpose.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. . . The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Romans 8:9-11, 16, 17)

The body of Christ is full of the Spirit. In this way, God still walks around in the flesh. Not that we are God, but we can have the heart and mind of Christ. We can have the motives of the Spirit directing our corporate and individual actions.

We are “called out” of the world and yet still very present in it. We inherit a sort of resilience—Christ touches the leper and, rather than contract leprosy, heals the infected person. His body in the world today, when it is at its best, functions in a similar capacity. Together, we can enter boldly into relationships with people who are in pain or suffering the consequences of sin. If we ourselves remain firmly bound together in Christian communities we can reach out without fear; we will not “be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

It’s true that the body is made up of flawed and corruptible members. Sometimes angry people join a church and their anger spreads and embitters others. People stir up dissension. Others corrupt. False prophets lead astray. These things happen anywhere and everywhere, including the church (and scripture warns us not to tolerate this kind of destruction in our communities). More remarkably, though, people who come to Christ

and join a local church experience healing. They exchange their hearts of stone for hearts of flesh. Bitterness is overcome by gratitude. Their membership in the body causes a transformation in them. They experience a sort of resurrection.

When our friend Janet brought Robert to our little church for the first time, he made a clear and memorable impression. He was dying slowly and very angry about it. Everything that he said was intended to scare us off. He didn't have anyone and he didn't want anyone. He wanted to make sure we didn't like him...but we did. In fact, the Spirit of Christ in us loved him. My husband began sitting with him in the back row. He made it clear that he wasn't put off. He had actually been looking for friendships, and I think it's fair to say that after about six months, Robert became Ben's best friend in Athens. Ben took over picking Robert up for church and would stay and talk for hours in Robert's driveway when he dropped him off. The more Ben listened, the more Robert's speech changed. Softened. It wasn't a one way relationship; Ben poured into Robert, but Robert made an investment in Ben that Ben was willing to receive.

When Ben got stressed about work, Robert asked me if he was OK. When an older woman at church wanted to learn how to use a computer, Robert wanted to know what we were going to do about it. When I got a chest cold that didn't go away, he put his hand on my shoulder and prayed for me. Robert would come to our house sometimes for dinner, or let me send me some lunch home with him. When Ben would be late coming home from dropping Robert off he would sometimes bring bouquets of wild flowers that Robert had helped him pick.

And when Robert finally died, over thirty people came to his memorial service to celebrate the person he had become—to express our gratitude that he had become a part of us in Christ.

Since the Church is the body through which God is now moving on earth, we move in a deliberate, missional, sacrificial way. We enter into the sorts of places and relationships that Christ moved during his earthly ministry. We hold onto hope for people that exceeds the hope they have for themselves and, like Christ, sometimes experience grief as a result. Christ laments in Matthew 23:37, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing." Those of us who work in the Timothy House constantly encounter people who numb their minds and bodies with drugs—who daily stay on a path that leads to death rather than finding a place in the body that leads to life.

We have known one family of sisters in particular for over three years. One stayed at the shelter with her small son, but was inattentive to him, giving her attention instead to men who would become her suppliers, and eventually losing custody of him. During this time, another sister moved in who did not have custody of her children and was waiting to be sentenced to prison time. She started new, unhealthy relationships during that time and moved in and out. She had another child, did time in prison, and returned when she got out. It initially appeared as though she had some kind of positive momentum, but this

was quickly choked out by more bad relationships, and a lack of follow-through. We met yet another of these sisters during this time. She was so high so often, and so dishonest that we were not able to allow her to live at the Timothy House for very long at all. The sister who had recently gotten out of prison was with her when she overdosed this fall. The two surviving sisters were devastated, but still unwilling to connect with healthy resources, still uninterested in giving faith anything but lip service. This is painful and confusing role for us to play. We are available. We have knowledge and connections with people that can be quite literally life saving. But we know so many men and women who continue to attempt to find satisfaction in poison—who have no appetite for the Way that bring life. We grieve because we know how much better things could be. If they were willing to taste, they would see that the Lord is good.

Anyone who is willing to join the body of Christ can find a place, a purpose, a distinct role, life, hope, and even salvation.

“...In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade...In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Christ Jesus is revealed” (1 Peter 1:3-7)

God is glorified when we persevere in showing love, and when we keep our faith. This perseverance is an act of worship. We can continue to hold out the possibility of belonging, of forgiveness of sin, of repentance, of reconciled relationships (with oneself, with God, and with others) to people who are not walking with Christ.

A dozen or so of us gather every week in the lobby of a building uptown. It's a subsidized apartment building for people with disabilities. We push chairs and tables together and share a meal, sing, study scripture, and pray.

Jack brought this incredible drawing of Sampson in the temple to our church gathering a couple of months ago. It was child like, but detailed, done with a strong hand and excellent color choice. He can't read, but when he described his drawing, he didn't miss a step in the story. Jack continually participates by sharing the good news from his memory. He smiles and opens the door for us as we arrive, making everyone feel welcome. And when we come together to take part in the Lord's Supper, Jack provides his best pitcher as the vessel for the juice.

Jenny uses a walker to get around even though she is not very old. Her mobility is limited, something I have never heard her complain about. For that matter, I've never heard her complain about anything. When she speaks up during our Bible studies, it's to ask questions that cut to the core, and to remind us simple but profound truths about never really being alone when we have Christ.

Angela is kind and generous. She tells us she's confused a lot as we talk about scripture, but she's really very insightful. She is kind and makes time to talk to everyone. Every other Sunday now she bakes the bread that we share as communion. She apologizes a lot for leaving this or that out, for over cooking, or under cooking it, but really there's nothing wrong; it's a beautiful contribution and she's getting better at it all the time.

Opal's voice is a rasp and a mumble. She is difficult to understand and doesn't attempt to talk with most people, but brings her own Bible and takes a turn reading scripture. When I sit next to her I can hear her sing.

We lead each other to worship. The Spirit in each one of us notices the good things in the others and we feel stirred up to draw them out. We are a collection of troubled people who together form something much more whole. On our own we are not very impressive. We stumble easily, but we can pick each other up. God is glorified when we help each other to become more like Christ. He is glorified when we recognize Christ in each other.