

The Body of Christ – a sermon on Romans 12:1-8

preached by Pastor Mark Harris to the First Church of Jaffrey on August 23rd, 2026

Please pray with me: Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my wandering mind, be acceptable in thy sight, even if everyone else thinks they're weird. Amen

I hope that you will become accustomed to the fact that I have some strange ideas. Some of them radical, some of them Biblical untraditional, some of them just plain . . . strange. This one, that leaped straight out of the Lectionary readings from Paul's letter to the Romans, while it is a riff on a Biblical idea, I think falls best into that last category of plain strange. Still, why not strike while the iron is hot in my honeymoon period and see what you think.

In the Christian tradition, there is the concept of the Body of Christ. This has meant, for much of the life of the church, the whole of Christianity, around the world. As the church weathered schism after schism, Roman Catholic from Eastern Orthodox, Protestant from Roman Catholic, American Pentecostalism from Main Line Protestantism, and more, the understanding of the Body of Christ has slowly expanded to cover all of these branches. We, in the United Church of Christ, were one of the first denominations to proclaim it a principle and project of our church to be both United and Uniting, seeking to deliberately bring back together some of what has split apart.

The phrase, the Body of Christ, is used as a synonym for something like, the Christian Church Universal, or the older term recently revived by self-professed Christian Nationalists, Christendom.

From a Scriptural and theological perspective, I think that the traditional usage of the phrase is way too small. Even though Christianity boasts the largest percentage of the world's population as adherents at over 25%, that number is still far from a majority of humans. A concept like the Body of Christ is one that arguably deserves a much more liberal application. We are united in a body with many important, even essential functions, by all means. But, if we limited the members of that body

to those who profess Christianity, I think we would be hard-pressed to accomplish any of those functions!

To be self-referential, I preached last week about how the ministry of Jesus evolved from that of a Rabbi come to correct the nation of Israel, to that of a multi-cultural teacher who came to preach love and fraternity to the entire world. Likewise, the disciples were charged to bring these teachings far and wide, to all communities some of which they could hardly imagine the existence of at that time. With these things in mind, how can the idea of the Body of Christ be so small as to only include the self-professed Christians in the world today. The idea, to me, seems almost meaningless if it is thought of to include anything less than the whole of humanity. In fact, I would argue that the concept should include every human being past, present, and future.

If we zoom out from the Scriptural basis that I've laid out, and consider, instead, the base philosophical concept, it drives the point home. Theology is the understanding of humanity through the lens of religious teaching and spiritual understanding. As such, it is intended to be a system that can be applied widely. We seek to understand the world and our lives through this lens. A world that is largely unexplored by most of us, and lives that we may only half remember, and with which we are as yet unfinished. Of what use is a system of understanding that ends only as far as we can see, and loses meaning when considering the past and the future? Of what use is a theology that only applies to those who already believe in it anyway? Again, the United Church of Christ proclaims our church both united and uniting, deliberately using the future voice.

When I was in Seminary, I had a classmate who was pursuing ordination in the Unitarian Universalist church. With their expansive view of Scripture and Doctrine, I sought her out to talk about this idea of mine, that the Body of Christ was all-inclusive. I used confronting language when I began the conversation, saying, "I think that I have realized that everyone is a Chrisitan!"

"Oh. Oh, no.," she answered, "That's not the case at all!"

We talked it out, and, once she understood the way in which I was using the term, she agreed heartily. Not, as she initially thought, that I saw everyone as Chrisitan-identifying, but rather that we were all included in my understanding of the Body of Christ, simply by being a member of the species.

To expand a little more on the theology, before I get to the really oddball stuff, let me tell you about a sermon I preached when I was at Salem. This was the only sermon I ever preached that I directly caused someone to stop attending a church that I pastored. Hopefully it will be the last. In the sermon, I articulated my opinion, that there is nothing in Christian Scripture that precludes the welcoming of people who also profess and adhere to another faith tradition. There are some instances in the Gospels that may warrant some further discussion in the light of this statement, and if you'd like to get into the weeds of those instances, catch me at fellowship hour. But I will stick to the idea that someone can follow Christianity, and also be a practicing Muslim, or a Buddhist.

THE ODDBALL STUFF

Consider, if you will, the noble honeybee. These creatures conduct their work and lives from the perspective not of individuals members, but rather as a hive. Workers fly back and forth gathering pollen to make into honey which is then stored to feed the hive through the winter. Honeybees do not hibernate. Instead, they remain awake and active within the hive, continuing their work, with some of them devoted solely to buzzing vigorously in order to create enough heat to keep the hive from freezing solid. It is because of this fact that honey from more northern climates is often much sweeter. The winter is longer and colder, as we know well, and a higher caloric content is needed in order to maintain the hive through it.

The lifespan of most honeybees is from 5 to 10 weeks. That is to say, most of those bees whose job it is to gather pollen will never see the winter that they prepare for. I cannot say if there is a theology or mythology shared by bees that grants them a glimpse of the hive in the future. Do they know that their hard work will sustain their descendants? Do we?

Humans are quite a bit more individual than honeybees, as certain members of our number are very quick to remind us. I think the idea of spending one's entire life working ceaselessly to provide for future generations is something that seems pretty cold and sad to most people. Of course, we care about the future, but to spend one's whole life so exclusively in that pursuit, without considering momentary

pleasure or timeless contemplation strikes me as pretty drab. I'm all for the Seven Generations concept, but can we discuss it over dinner and a glass of wine, please?

As individual as we are, though, with regard to our choices and our self-direction, little to nothing of what we accomplish in life can take place without cooperation with other humans. Our American society in particular likes to place major advances and accomplishments at the feet of individuals. Albert Einstein created the atomic bomb. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. undertook and completed the Civil Rights movement. Edison invented the light bulb.

All of that is false, though. I once asked a friend where Einstein did his experiments. He didn't know and asked me for the answer. But Einstein was a theoretical physicist. He didn't do experiments as we understand them and operated solely in the laboratory of his own mind. He had very little to do with the development of atomic weapons, beyond coming up with the theory that led to their creation. Meanwhile, his theories were built upon centuries of thought that spanned human history.

King may have been the popular face of the Civil Rights Movement, but he most assuredly did not work alone. In fact, his forwarding of civil disobedience as a methodology depended specifically on actions taken by large groups of people. And I think that, were he here today, he would be one of the many voices saying that the work is far from finished.

Edison famously ran a vast series of labs and invention industries which utilized many brilliant minds to create inventions that utilized new scientific understandings of our world. If anything, most historians now agree that he took credit for many concepts and inventions that were squarely other people's work.

Were any one of us to be dropped on an island for the rest of our lives, we might well survive to live a long life. With the proper resources, and maybe a few choice tools, we could build shelter, find food, and live reasonably comfortably. But within 100 years or less of our inevitable demise, there would likely be little to no trace of our existence left there, at least little directly attributable to us. With the ability to see through time to some degree, do we even exist as individuals?

I propose that we do not. I propose that we are little to nothing to ourselves and to the world, except in cooperation with others. Almost nothing you have interacted with this morning, from your coffee to your car to this church, could have existed

without cooperation. As such, I don't think we can even understand ourselves as individuals in any meaningful way. Instead, we are all members in a vast corporate species, made up of cells that have been individual choice in someone's questionable wisdom. We are cells in a Body, the Body of Humanity, which I choose to refer to as The Body of Christ.

Amen