

Keeping the Flame Alive

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Ancient Witness: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

I can remember when these words were spoken at my ordination about 36 years ago. It was the culmination of a process that took many, many years. My parents would take me to Sunday school for many years, but I really loved to go to worship. I guess I wasn't very typical in that way. I was really intrigued to hear about the Christian faith. I had so many questions. So I actually looked forward to the sermon each Sunday. And the sermons by Jack Stewart at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan were thoughtful and challenging. They somehow matched and resonated with the deep hunger and searching within me.

I didn't take the usual path. I didn't go to confirmation class and felt out of place in the youth group. I was more serious than the other young people, I think. I didn't find those things helpful to my own searching.

When I was in college, I set up an appointment and talked with Dr. Stewart in his office about my curiosity to go to seminary. He would give me books to read and assignments. One of them was to work with the church youth group as a volunteer. I gravitated to taking philosophy courses in college. I started to think about going to seminary, but not because I was certain that I wanted to be a minister. Far from it. Rather I went to continue my thirst and my own searching. I sensed that there was something meaningful and important to this thing called “Christianity.” I wanted to understand it in a way that had relevance to this modern world. So I left for four years to try it out, to see if there was something there for me.

So there I was years later, on a hot June Sunday afternoon, at the First Presbyterian Church in Franklin, Tennessee at my service of ordination by the presbytery of Middle Tennessee. One of my professors drove down from Louisville and preached at the service. Other friends participated in the service. Near the end, the elders and ministers came down and laid hands on me and prayed. And I heard these familiar words: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Paul would write that there are different roles to fill in this body: apostles, prophets, teachers, those with the gifts of healing, interpreting tongues, leadership. All of them are important and needed. One body, many gifts.

Since then, I have given my life to the church and to the well-being of many congregations. But it is not just pastors who are called to be servants of the church. Many dedicated lay people have felt this call, as well.

Those words were a blur to me then, but I've had the chance to reflect upon them from time to time through the years. “You are the body of Christ” is a *fearsome* thing to say. These are words that can only be uttered with fear and trembling. You are the body of Christ. It's up to *you* now. What happens if we fail? If we drop the torch? If the story runs out?

It sounds dramatic, but through the centuries there have been critical times when it looked like the story of our faith might die out. In the second century BCE, under the brutal rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Jewish tradition was struggling to survive and was hanging on by a thread. And there was a resistance movement called the Maccabean rebellion that kept the flame alive. Two hundred years later, the Jewish faith was almost extinguished again when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman empire. The siege of Masada happen around this time, which became a symbol of their struggle and resistance. A small group of intensely devoted people keep the story going. In the first and second centuries CE, the followers of Jesus were hunted down, persecuted and almost were extinguished. Many of them took refuge in the catacombs, the burial tunnels under the city of Rome. Some intensely devoted communities, such as the Essenes, took refuge in desolate places, such as the cave at Qumran. But the flame did not go out. And in the Dark Ages, the body was kept alive by the resilience and tenacity of monastic communities throughout Europe.

In these times, what kept the flame alive were these small groups of highly committed people, people with intense devotion and perseverance in the face of hardship and persecution. In Christian theology, we refer to these times of crisis and the survival of the faith as due to a remnant. Remnant theology says that all that it takes is the faith and dedication of just a few people to keep the flame alive.

Now there are some who may think that the death of the church might be a good thing. After all, Christianity has been responsible for some horrendous things. Lands have been conquered; people subjugated; individuals persecuted; the list goes on and on. And today, we hear some of the voices in the church denigrate gay, lesbian and gender nonconforming people. We see a merger of the faith with white supremacy. We acknowledge various forms of Christian nationalism. So people may, quite understandably, want the church to die. One could say that much of the church is already dead, rotted and corrupted from within. In the book of Revelation, John referred to these churches as dead, lukewarm, without life. Jesus used the term, “whitewashed tombs.” Only a thin veneer of the faith covers self-centered desires and disguises other agendas. Today’s “prosperity gospel” comes to mind.

But I am one who believes that the existence of the church, the body of Christ, is a profoundly good thing, an important thing, for all of its faults. Just as the death of humanity itself, for all of its faults, would be a terrible thing. It would be a disaster for the Christian faith to fade away and come to an end. For the faith carries within it the seeds of healing for itself, but also the world. There is something within this narrative that is vital to survive.

Next Sunday is Pentecost, and some celebrate this as the “birthday of the church.” And if we were to sing Happy Birthday, I hope we would add at the end, “and many more.”

Perhaps we are facing another one of those times in history now. And we can ask ourselves, will the flame go out? Will the faith survive? Does it matter? In Europe, the church as been near death for years. Great cathedrals have been kept open as museums with gift shops. Now we see that the church in America is not far behind. Thousands of churches are closed every year. Membership now is lower than 50% of the population, but real participation is much, much lower than that. And many of the outwardly successful churches are already dead within, serving to protect a way of life and privilege that the larger society recognizes needs to change. The church and our faith has not evolved and been a living, changing faith, and so it’s fading from relevance in our world today.

And so this is how I often think of the church today. The halcyon days of a prosperous, vital and relevant church are over. We are now fighting to keep the flame from going out, and to keep a faith with humility alive. We are defending it from outside forces of greed and power, consumerism and nihilism. And we are defending it from itself as it becomes hollowed out by its own fears and anxious grasping.

People are not going to stop doing good things when the church dies away. There will still be acts of generosity and compassion. There will still be movements for social justice and fairness. I'm not worried about that. Perhaps service organizations and social action groups will still go strong. And certainly the church exists to be a voice for the powerless and an advocate for the poor, the oppressed and the dispossessed. And to bind the wounds of others. But the loss of the church will be the loss of faith, a way of seeing the world that gives life and meaning. It is a loss of purpose that is greater than our efforts that brings a kind of peace and joy that is not of this world. It brings a revolution to our souls. A radical reorientation.

I like that image of the tree. We will still be engaged in action. The things that we can see. The branches, the leaves and the fruit. But what faith is about is the roots. That which is hidden. The assurance of things unseen. The tap root of life and truth and wisdom. It is the blessing from which all blessings flow. It is the crucial focus on the deep interiority of our lives. The loss of this would be devastating.

What, then, shall we do? What is needed now more than ever are not consumers, but disciples. What is needed, to paraphrase Jack Kennedy, are people who ask not what the church can do for them, but who ask what they can do for the church. As in other times of crisis for the faith, it seems to me that we are in need of that faithful remnant mentality. It takes just a few who are devoted to keep that flame alive. Focusing less on the outward numbers and signs of prosperity and stressing more the purity and truth of our hearts and the message. This is what will survive. Like the blade of grass coming up through the cracks in the concrete.

Friends, you are the body of Christ! And we are responsible for keeping the Body of Christ alive for future generations. We are part of this story, this narrative. Let's not let it run out. The flame is flickering within us.

Thanks be to God. Thanks be to Christ.
Amen.