The Growing Body

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I wonder if you all felt as I did, wanting to cringe, when reading the last verse of our Psalm together. Thanks be to God that we have Jesus’ interpretation of our law and that we have Jesus’ teachings; that we are, in fact, to love not only our neighbors, but to love our neighbors and to pray for those who persecute us. It is hard, isn’t it, to read or hear passages of scripture that include references to institutions, understandings, or behaviors that accept or normalize what we now understand to be dehumanizing? I want to name this as I imagine you also cringe as I do when I hear Paul speak of the treatment of slaves as though any human being were worthless because of the situation into which they were born, or the person they are. For our understanding today, always, the unchanging truth is that God wants for *each* of us to recognize that our faith and our actions are held back by ourselves alone, and that God wants for us to live fully, abundantly as God has provided for us to live. In our understanding of the love of Jesus that is ever expanding our definition of neighbor, there is always more that we can do and be for each other. On this World Communion Sunday, we choose to remember our unity worldwide.

“For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” So, what is there to be afraid of? The apostle Paul, writing to his frequent companion and fellow Christian Timothy, is first grateful for Timothy’s continuing faith, and then he is challenging to his living out this faith. Paul knew firsthand the dangers associated with being a Christian. He had been imprisoned, and knew full well that others had died for their faith. So, he congratulates Timothy on having sustained his faith thus far, and he reminds him continually to “rekindle the gift that is in him from God.” So, what is this gift? “A spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” Some gift, we might say . . . Who wants self-discipline?

I was thankful this week, even grateful, as I wrote to six people who have been worshipping among us for a period of time, such that we are inviting them to publicly proclaim their faith in the God who sustains us by joining in membership in the congregation. While some persons might say that this is not a big deal, that times have changed and there is no danger in proclaiming our faith in Christ, I would argue otherwise. There may be great unanimity in our country regarding the value of financial security, but there is no such unanimous thinking around faith. There is no such unanimity around admitting that we owe our lives to the God who made us, nor that there is anything from which we need to be saved. We are acknowledging that there is a Holy Spirit among us, a spirit of power, and love, and self-discipline. And while we may not be stoned for professing this fact, acknowledging this is still pretty counter-cultural, and I would proclaim with Paul that living in the presence of this spirit can challenge our strength and our courage. Considering the rather angry and too often exclusionary voice of Christianity in our country, I am grateful for the witness of this community of faith as we proclaim our trust in God, who through Christ has commanded us to love not only our friends and family, but to love even those we would name as enemy.

The Bible is not the only place I look for wisdom, nor is it the only place I look to sustain my courage and my faith. I often rely on the counsel and support of family and friends, the support of, well, you; and when we connect ourselves to this church body, we have all extended our family by nearly a hundred persons. Yes, we can look to each other to be our wisdom and our courage from time to time.

Yet, I think that I am quoting too many sources to name when I say that “The church is one generation away from extinction.” Have you heard this expression? We are an endangered species, according to those who study the evident decline in church numbers. We fear extinction, and some say we will bring to pass this extinction through our fear itself. How might this be so? Well, we may give in to the notion that our lives are too busy for church and stay away. We may be afraid when we are visiting another town on vacation that the style of worship may be boring, or simply incompatible with our tastes, and so we will stay away. We may be afraid that we don’t quite measure up to the way a gathered community dresses, or sings, or gives, and we stay away. But I want for you to consider this an invitation: Come worship here, as often as you can, because you are welcome—no matter who you are, no matter where you have come from, and no matter where you are in your faith journey. Worship with this body, with all its flaws and faults, and with the power of the Holy Spirit we will be a community of love and power and self-discipline. Because, you see, the more we live into our faith the more our faith grows. It is that simple.

Hunh!? But it isn’t really simple, is it? There are competing voices for what it means to be a Christian, such that it behooves us to remember more simply to do what Jesus did and to do what he told us to do. Our faith in the goodness of others is wracked by our knowledge of the inhumane way that we humans treat each other, both in the most heinous of individual acts of violence and in the equally heinous systematic, long-term abuse of peoples, in our own country as well as in nations at war. Because of this, we may wonder where God is hiding as humanity’s power for evil feels so great. Then, we may remember that *we* are the body of Christ on this earth, with our own words and actions the only way that some will know God’s presence with them. And “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” How may we strengthen God’s known presence in the world today?

Maybe another way to ask that question is to say, how do we grow in Spirit and in Love? The news is not all bad, friends. We do have cause for celebration today. We are about to share in a meal, in nourishment for our souls—and I don’t say this lightly. Jesus, our Christ, gave his life for us, and asked that we remember him each time that we eat bread or drink wine. Our meal is Holy Communion with Jesus and all those who profess their faith in him. It is union with God who made us, and with Jesus who loved and loves us; it is union with the Spirit that lives in us when we open ourselves to the Spirit’s presence. Communion is a sacrament, a holy event, and we discipline ourselves in partaking of this sacrament together. We are strengthened by its sustenance. This sacrament is a “good treasure,” and as much as it may be easy to say we are Christians, not everyone in this town or in this world is celebrating this sacrament this morning. Know this, though: today is World Communion Sunday, and when we share in this meal, we are uniting with the Body of Christ the world over. We may fear the so-called decline of the church; we may fear so much of what is happening, but if we “Guard the good treasure entrusted to us, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us,” this church will grow; the followers of Jesus’ way will make a difference in the lives of others.

In sharing the parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus ends by challenging his disciples not to have done only what they *ought* to have done." So, I wonder what ought we to do as the Church? We ought to love, and we ought to empower others. We ought to be self-disciplined. We believe in God, we believe in Christ, and we believe in the Holy Spirit. This is a powerful starting place, and we can do more than we can *imagine* how this Body will grow from this seed. Let us pray.

Dear Lord, please help us to grow in faith and in action so that your Body, the church, will be a reflection of all your good gifts. Amen.