

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Misfits & Pilgrims

1 Cor 12.12-31

January 23, 2022

In today's Gospel reading, we see Jesus being baptized. In our Epistle reading, we also hear of the power and meaning of baptism, for in one Spirit, we are all baptized into one body and all made to drink of one Spirit. Baptism is on our minds and hearts today, both in these witnesses from Scripture and perhaps, in the memories of our own baptisms.

I remember a little bit about my baptism. I was about 10 years old. Big church. Baptistry way up there behind the choir. I remember my pastor, Dr. Gaddy, met with me beforehand to talk about what it meant to accept Jesus as my Savior. I think my little legs swung while seated in his overstuffed sofa in his office. I walked the aisle. He prayed with me and for me. My grandmother sent in the mail a workbook for new Christians. I think it was called The Toolkit. I don't know if that's still around anymore. I was to look up Scripture passages and fill in the blanks to complete the sentences. And as I recall, this package was the only intentional preparation for baptism that I received.

Like, Romans 3.23: "For all have (blank) and fallen short of the glory of God" I looked that up and the word was "sinned." I wrote in *sinned*.

Romans 6.23, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is _____ through Jesus Christ our Lord." I wrote *eternal life*.

Romans 5.8, "While we were yet sinners, Christ _____ for us." (*died*)

Romans 10.9, "If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, you will be _____" (*saved*).

After filling in those blanks, on the next page was a picture of a road leading to a big cross. Each of these scripture passages were like signs posted on the road. They called it the Romans Road to Salvation since each of the scriptures were from the book of Romans. Makes sense. I liked that, a simple, straightforward way of understanding salvation. I'm a sinner, but Christ died for me. And God gives eternal life to those who believe Jesus is raised from the dead, for those who confessed with their mouth and believed in their heart. I liked this.

I liked that, but I don't think I finished the workbook. I think I left several chapters untouched. I wonder if one of the later chapters in the workbook, one of the ones I left with a bunch of unfilled-in blanks, I wonder if one of the later chapters in The Toolkit had another road called the 1 Corinthians Road. It doesn't roll off the tongue like Romans Road, so I'm thinking no. I'm also thinking nah because that road that goes through First Corinthians would be a lot bumpier than the Romans road. The Romans Road is pretty straight and straightforward. You're a sinner like everyone else. Jesus died on the cross to save you. If you confess Jesus is Lord you will be saved. Baptism is a sign of our salvation. It's pretty straightforward for a person, even a child, to understand. It's beautiful.

To ride the Romans Road, you just need a single passenger vehicle. On the Romans Road, as it is presented, salvation is about the individual--about me and my relationship with God in Christ. And that's important, for sure. The First Corinthians Road, were there such a thing, would be an HOV lane, high occupancy vehicles.

To ride the First Corinthians Road, you get on a bus, and not a clean, sleek charter bus, I mean one of those busses in a developing country. Have you ever been on one of those? Well, I have. No actually I haven't either. No way I'm getting on one of those. I've seen the pictures. People hanging on anywhere they can get a handhold. The driver swerving to barely miss oncoming traffic and barely clinging to broken gravel around hairpin mountain turns. Chickens in coops up on the roof. People stuffed in wherever they can find a seat, that's if they're lucky. And forget about personal space or getting to choose who you're sitting with. On that kind of bus, on that kind of road, you're in this together. And together means really, really togetherness. And in that is the key to First Corinthians. You're in this together. The First Corinthians Road to salvation is a shared experience.

Actually, I did have a travelling experience like this, but on a train, not a bus. We had tickets on a train that was to go from one country to another. We prebought our tickets and printed them out. We had reserved seats. Two seats together. We even had the little letter and number on our ticket to prove it. Car 8, Row D, Seats 1-2. We arrived at the station and stood on the cool, empty, platform, waiting for our train. And we waited. And we waited.

There was a train worker strike in Europe, which left only a few trains still running. They have civilized strikes in Europe—they still leave a few trains running. And the ones that were, were all running late. Ours was hours late. When the train finally pulled up, we shuffled on to Car 8, which was totally packed with people from all over the world, crammed together like French fries in a box, like meat loaf in a pan, like lasagna, like a big breakfast burrito. There was no getting away from anyone. Row D seats 1-2, our seats, already had people sitting in them.

I politely said, excuse me those are our seats. This was met by blank stares. I looked around then understood what was happening. These were people who had tickets on every other cancelled train from the whole day wherever they were coming from. This was the only train going. So, everyone got on. So, forget your assigned seat, just find somewhere to plop down and good luck. I spent the next 4 hours sitting on a suitcase in the aisle. And I was just glad to be there. And you know what, those of you who have had a similar experience will know this, it was alright. People started singing and talking in various languages, swapping stories about where they were from and trading advice about where they were going. When we finally arrived at our destination, we ended up sharing a cab with some other folks we'd met. For a few hours, crammed into whatever place we could find, there was a kind of solidarity, a kind of community that formed 80 kilometers an hour through the countryside, even if it was a bit of a carnival.

When 1 Corinthians describes the church community on the road to salvation, it looks like a rolling carnival, a lumbering train carrying its tired but grateful passengers along their way together. It's the together part that makes the difference. There are no individuals here. I mean, everyone's an individual, unique in their own way. But no one can have any imagination that they're in this alone. You're not Car D, Row 8, Seat 1 where you can politely ignore the other seats. You're a member of this travelling band of misfits and businessmen, students and pilgrims. No matter who you were before you got on and no matter who you think you'll be when you get off, no one has a seat assigned to them, and there's no first class on this ride. We're all in this together, very together.

On the Romans Road, we can think of ourselves baptized individually into Christ. On the Corinthian Road, the Spirit baptizes us into one body, Christ's body, and we all drink from the one Spirit. In baptism and communion, you become part of a body that doesn't consist of one member—just you, alone in your private relationship with Jesus—but of many—you and them as the body of Christ, the Church.

St. Paul goes into great imaginative detail to describe the church as a collection of body parts, each an important member. No one is to say, "I'm not good enough to be here." Yes, you are. You're important. No one is to say, "That other person's not important enough to be here." Yes, they are, we need each one. This body isn't sculpted by a classically trained professional artist who perfectly chisels the final product with symmetrical style. This is a body arranged by God, who is an obvious amateur. God is an amateur artist, whose resume prior to crafting the church body included the platypus, the narwhal, and the armadillo. So, what do you expect? But remember, *amateur* doesn't just mean *non-professional*, and it doesn't mean *non-skilled*. An amateur means one who does what they do out of love. God is an amateur who does what he does out of love. This body is fashioned from love and for love, and both sides of that are equally important.

This body, the body of Christ, the Church, is made out of love by the Spirit's design. And it's made in order to love, to love one another and to love the world. That's the original biblical vision of Church.

Church can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. If you reduce it down to its simplest elements and purpose, you end up with something like this image here in 1 Corinthians 12. A collection of people joined mystically together by God's Spirit as members of the body of Christ, made alive and made aware of their life together through baptism that makes them and through communion that renews them for their journey of love to pick up and bring along anyone waiting at any lonely station in life who is waiting for good news to come along and welcome them not just to Christ but into Christ. This is the simple ecclesiology of the New Testament. We are members of Christ with one another to love one another and the world.

Someone will say, this is just idealistic. Church isn't really a community like that. Someone else will say, Church definitely isn't like that. I haven't been loved; I've been shunned. I haven't been cared for; I've been hurt. Church hasn't been a source of community or of Christ; I've had to

find Christ outside of or in spite of the church I've known. All this talk about the body of Christ is just idealistic dreaming. I'd rather stand on this platform at this empty station all alone than get on that travelling circus again.

To them, what else can we say than you're undoubtedly right. And on behalf of our own failures and those of churches past and present, we're sorry. We're truly sorry. Paul mentions apostles, prophets, teachers, powerful people, healers, helpers, leaders, tongue speakers, and all at one time or another have failed to carry forward the apostolic ministry of Christ, to prophetically speak truth, to teach about God, to use power well, to heal the brokenhearted, to help those in need, to lead as servants, to speak with love and grace.

We've all sinned. Romans is right. We've all known the hurt of the sins of others. Corinthians is right. The cost of being in community like this is sometimes some pain.

It's helpful to remember, at least it is for me, that the Church I was baptized into, and the Church I have baptized so many into--the capital C church--includes the Corinthians, too. The Corinthians were a mess. The people St. Paul wrote this passage about the church body to were a mess. This wasn't idealism speaking to perfection. This was a desperate plea written to a three-ring circus of very human people. The first 11 chapters are mostly about things going wrong in the community—divisions and dissensions, arguments about who was greater and who should be in charge. There's family problems and moral issues. They're suing one another.

It's the way they shared a meal really bothered Paul. When they came together for their potluck meal, a few people who thought they possessed 1st class tickets to life, would jump the line and fill their plates with the homemade fried chicken and banana pudding. Those at the end of the line were left with just the cold store-bought macaroni salad. Paul says, "Look at what you're doing. Look at how you're living your life. It's all right there in how you are sharing your meal. That's not the Lord's supper you eat. The Lord's supper is a shared experience, a sign of the church, as it is, as ." That's just one example of the many ways that church community struggled.

In their reflection on living as Christian community, the Taize community asks: "How can Paul praise a community where so many things have gone wrong? How can he consider them all the same the body of Christ, God's Church? It is because Paul, in spite of all their imperfections, is certain of the presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. We normally recognize the Spirit's presence in everything that is good and beautiful, but do we see enough how he is at work in imperfect situations? In our lives too, in all their messiness and ambiguity, the Spirit is at work."

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What we can see is this: the so-called idealistic picture of the Church body as a community isn't a mirror to the church that is. And it's not a memorial to a Church that was. It's a mystical

¹ https://www.taize.fr/en_article167.html?date=2017-09-01

picture of what's true about us no matter who we've been or who we are even if that hope and truth for now lies beyond our sight, beyond what our hands can grasp.

Even the Corinthians were greeted with a blessing, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

The grace of God given us in Christ is a gift and a hope we pray for again and again every time someone is raised dripping wet from their baptisms--Christ raised to new life--and every time the bread is broken--Christ's body broken that our body with his may be made whole.

Now let us remember that we are the body of Christ an individually members of it, and we are beautiful in God's sight.

Thanks be to God.

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