



TOUCH POINT

The Heresy of Individualism – Touchpoint for January 19, 2022

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a (NRSV) ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“For there is one body, but many parts... Now you are the Body of Christ and members of it.”

I don't know if there is an easy way to ease into this one. It is a two-fold assault on ‘American Christianity.’ It attacks both the ‘American’ and the ‘Christianity’ of ‘American Christianity.’ It cuts at the heart of our society, our nation, our western civilization.

This passage at its core, is saying that we are not individuals at our core. We are relational beings. Our meaning, being, and identity is always found in relation to another, to others.

Or as Kierkegaard once wrote as only he could,

“Therefore, the self is not a self.”

The person growing up in the western world identifies him or herself from the phrase, “I think therefore I am.” Which is about the most narcissistic, self-centered definition of a person that can exist. Because in that sentence... I am the subject, my activity is the verb... and I am even the object. And because I am an individual, I have certain individual rights that have been endowed to me by my creator — individual rights that I can claim over and against you.

This is all according to our national sacred writing, which for many is inerrant and infallible.

But what Paul is telling us is that as Christians, we don't have individual rights, we have communal responsibilities.

For there is one body, but many parts... and you are members of it

"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it."

Or as Jesus said, "Love your neighbor **AS YOURSELF**." Not "as much" as yourself, but "as" yourself. You and your neighbor are one.

It's not about the individual, it's about the community. It's not about rights, it's about responsibilities. I challenge you to go look up in the Bible and find where it says we have INDIVIDUAL rights and where it lists what those individual rights are. We don't have RIGHTS!!! We have RESPONSIBILITIES!!!

"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it." "Love your neighbor as yourself."

And we have those responsibilities because we are all connected. That is the starting point. That is our foundation. A biblical person would identify him or herself this way. "I am connected, therefore I am." My identity is a gift from others and I gift others with their identity. It is within our relationships that we are fed and nourished and given identity.

Now I realize that 'all things are possible with God' so within that caveat — I am going to say as unequivocally as possible — you cannot grasp this passage, nor can it grasp you within the framework of a western civilization, "I think therefore I am" mindset. You just can't get there from here.

Think of the cells of our body. They work together, in harmony for the sake of the whole. So, what do we call a cell that decides to be an individual and not work with other cells? What do we call a cell that sees the others cells as existing for itself? That's called a cancer cell, folks.

Look, when a body part separates itself from the body, it dies. When a branch separates itself from the vine, it dies. When God created humanity God created them male and female in the first creation story and in the second one Adam was not complete until Eve was created.

The concept of the 'individual' is not a concept that scripture understands.

*"Love your neighbor **as yourself**."*

For there is one body, but many parts and you are members of it

If you understand this concept then maybe you can understand the words of Father Thomas Keating when he says, "The one thing that separates us from God is believing we are separate from God."

Or maybe you can understand what former bishop of the Episcopal church Katherine Jefferts Schori meant when she said in 2009, "The great Western heresy is that we can be saved as individuals, that any of us **alone**, can be in a right relationship with God... that individualist focus is a form of idolatry, for it puts me and my words in the place that only God can occupy, at the center of existence, as the ground of being." That got her in a lot of trouble by the way... as if you couldn't have guessed that.

St. Paul tries to get at much the same thing a few chapters before our passage today when he says that the unbelieving spouse and unbelieving children of a believer will be saved because of their connection to the believer.

And finally, Dante's Inferno tries to get at the same idea but from a reverse angle. In Dante's Inferno, the

lowest level of Hell — the worst level of Hell — is not fire and brimstone, but ice: a frozen lake where everyone is frozen and stuck and cannot communicate, relate or connect with anyone else. Everyone there has achieved the height of individuality — isolated and alone — and it is HELL.

“For there is one body, but many parts... and you are members of it.”

Therefore, one cannot say to another, you don't belong, you are not a part of Christ.

We have tried to reduce the life of faith to an individual level — a private level — and Paul will have nothing of it. Yes, one's life of faith is personal, hopefully, deeply personal, but it is not private and individual.

But it isn't just our reduction of faith to a private and individual space that is attacked here. Our concept of the Christ is attacked as well. In American Christianity, we have not just reduced our faith to something private and individual, we have reduced our concept of the Body of Christ as well. We believe it pertains only to a group of believers. Our collective belief is what creates the Body of Christ. “We believe; therefore, the Body of Christ is.”

But Paul speaks of the Christ as existing from the beginning of creation. He writes in Colossians, “In Christ, all things in heaven and earth were created... all things have been created through Christ and for Christ... in Christ all things hold together.” And then this from Paul, “Christ is all and in all.”

Let me repeat that for you. “Christ is all and in all.”

To paraphrase Richard Rohr, if ‘Jesus’ is the name for the marriage of the divine and the creation at a specific time and place in history, then ‘Christ’ is the name for the marriage of the divine and the creation throughout all eternity.

And therefore, the body of Christ is not limited to a collection of believers but is present in and through all of creation. “Christ” is not Jesus' last name, but something much bigger.

For there is one creation, but many parts... and you are all members of it.

For there is one body, but many parts... and you are members of it.

For there is one Christ, but many parts... and you are members of it.

They all say the same thing.

Therefore, one cannot say to another, you don't belong, you are not a part of the creation, the body, the Christ.

Isn't that what we are saying in this meal? We say that the Christ is present in this bread and wine. In the ordinary elements of food and drink — broken and shared with others — we experience the Divine, the Mystery, the Christ.

In the relationship of ourselves with the earth and its fruits, in the relationship of ourselves with others, we experience the Divine, the Mystery, the Christ.

This meal is our ‘Jesus’, the marriage of the divine and creation at a specific time and place in history. So, we can experience the ‘Christ’ in every meal and in every encounter with another.

To repeat what we've said the last couple of weeks, “This meal is the assurance of what is.” This meal is

the assurance that the Christ is present in all of our encounters: our plain, ordinary, daily encounters. It is not just limited to this meal and this place.

Now you know why Luther was mocked when he insisted on the Real Presence of the Christ in this meal. People laughed at him and said, "If Christ is really present in the bread and wine than you might as well say he is present in the cabbage soup at the local pub." To which Luther supposedly replied, "Yes, exactly." And he could have just as well have added, "and not just in the cabbage, but in the guy and the gal sitting next to me and eating and drinking with me."

Look, the idea of the 'Real Presence' in the meal isn't about a belief system. It is about an experience, a connection, a 'soul connection' to use the words of my friend Alan Nohre.

It is a 'soul connection' with the presence of the Christ **in the earthly elements** of food and drink... and the presence of the Christ **in those next to me**... and the presence of the Christ **in me**.

The Real Presence is not a noun or a doctrine, it is a verb and an experience, in every time and in every place, in every person and every encounter.

For "*Christ is all and in all.*"

For there is one creation, but many parts... and you are all members of it.

For there is one body, but many parts... and you are members of it.

For there is one Christ, but many parts... and you are members of it.

Along with everyone else.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God

Calm Me Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Dwell Among Us

(Salt of the Sound)

Keep moving and living and breathing in us
Keeping working and singing and speaking through us
You dwell among us...
With all this life I long to see, more of You and less of me
Lord send Your spirit here to work in us

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(The Scottish Festival Singers)

Benediction

My Peace

(Keith Duke)

Peace to know, Peace to live,
Peace to show, and a peace to give.
It's a peace to share and a peace that cares.
My peace I give unto you. My peace.

