

Gathering

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. 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. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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. 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. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12: 12-20, 26-27

Here is the church, here is the steeple.

Open the door and see all the people.

Do you remember that hand game? Well, this year we have turned this little ditty on its head. Not only have we removed the steeple from our church, we have removed the people. OK, maybe we haven't exactly *removed* the people, but for the past six months, if you come by here at 10:30 on a Sunday morning and open the door, what you'll see is this empty space. This sanctuary has never gone unoccupied for so long since it was built nearly 65 years ago.

We have heard all our lives that the church is not the building, it's the people. But what if there are no people here in this empty building? Can we still be the church?

When Paul was writing to the congregations in Asia minor and other places, the word he used that is translated “church” is *ekklesia*, which means “the assembly.” Even back then, the church wasn't the building, it was the assembly of the people. And assembling for worship here in this place is, of course, central to what we are all about as church. But the bonds that hold us together as a community, the tie that binds (to use the words of the hymn we will sing) are not found exclusively in our in-person gathering.

We recently changed a sign on our office door. It used to say: “All church activities are cancelled.” But, of course, that isn't true. It is true that we continue to postpone our in-person worship on Sunday mornings, but that doesn't mean we have cancelled or even postponed being the church. And in the part of the letter to the Corinthian church that we read today, Paul helps us understand what it means to be the church, the assembly, even when we can't all assemble in one place.

In ancient Greek and Roman formal speaking and writing, it was a common rhetorical device to compare human society or organizations to the human body. But Paul takes this analogy to a different place. After having some fun with ludicrous

images of a body as all eyes or all ears, to illustrate the need for diversity and the interdependence of the members of the body, Paul gets down to his main point. This body is more than just the sum of its individual parts; this body that we call the church is the body of Christ. It is the way that Christ remains present in the world, through the hands and feet and open hearts of these scattered gatherings of ordinary people who have been brought into the life of Christ through their baptism.

What weaves us together in this body is not our worship practices, not the theological doctrines we agree on. It's not anything that we do. It is the one Spirit that we were baptized into that serves as the holy glue that keeps diverse and sometimes disagreeing people in communion with each other. This is why Paul says that we are not only individual members of this body of Christ; we are also members of each other. We are connected to each other in ways that go beyond just the coincidence of being in the same place at the same time. There is more to our gathering than a collection of autonomous individuals, who meet occasionally, and then go off to do our own thing. And what is more important these days is that we remain connected in this spiritual sense even when we are not here together.

I recently made contact with distant cousins in Texas that I discovered through some genealogical work. It was heartbreaking to find out that on two occasions when I was visiting the cemetery where my great-grandparents are buried, I was less than a mile from where these cousins have preserved our family's original farm, but at the time I didn't know it. We have never met in person, but in our brief correspondence I have already felt a real sense of connection, a bond. There is still much about them I don't know, and those things certainly matter. But we are discovering a sense of kinship and a connection to those who came before us, whose stories we are an extension of, that matters even more.

When Paul wrote his letters he often ended with some form of postscript, with a personal note. At the end of his letter to the church in Rome, he sends assorted greetings and shout-outs to Phoebe and Prisca and Aquilla and Rufus and Julia and nearly two dozen more. Paul Achtemeier says, "What these greetings show is Paul's consciousness of being a part of a larger Christian fellowship within which God's Spirit is at work to accomplish God's plan."

Paul did not cease to be part of their community when he left for other places, and we didn't cease to be a community when we walked out the door of our church building on a March 15 to go our separate ways. We are still the gathered ones, the assembly, the *ekklesia*. And we are still part of the larger body of Christ, a global membership that we will celebrate in a few weeks on World Communion Sunday.

These extraordinary circumstances, when we are unable to gather in person even for an hour or two once a week, call us to be even more intentional about continuing to be the church, to continue functioning as a community that looks after each other and looks to the well-being of our neighbors. As Paul suggests, we are so closely tied to each other that when even one of us is suffering, we all feel that suffering; and if anyone of us celebrates, it makes us all joyful.

We are a community called to gather in whatever ways are available, so that we can continue to grow in our faith and continue to go out and make Christ known to our neighbors by making space for those who have no place, and who may not be included in other gatherings.

Let us pray:

Gather us in, O Christ.

Bind us to your Spirit, bind us to each other,
bind us to those we are called to serve in this world.

Set us loose from the things that draw us away from each other,
and from the things that draw us into ourselves and our wants.

Gather us all into your body. Amen.

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2020
First Presbyterian Church
Mason City, Iowa

13 September