



THE STATE OF THE COMMUNION

I Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21

[Since spoken communication differs from written, some of the grammar and syntax of this transcript may seem awkward in written form. To keep integrity with the spirit of the original delivery, the transcript seeks to stay close to the exact words spoken].

Let us pray. *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

Each year on this Sunday I preach a sermon entitled "The State of the Communion" and it's a time when I sort of catalog the things we ought to celebrate and talk about maybe where God is calling us to go as a church. It's about what it means to be the church. But as I sat down to write my sermon on Friday I thought, "You know, that's just not quite right. It just doesn't feel right today." So I threw it out. And I want to do something different. The sermon is about what the church is called to be and do. But I thought I'd take a somewhat different approach and simply offer maybe a few images that bespeak--that suggest--who we are and what we are called to do as a church.

This is what I thought about this past week. I thought about bodies...images of bodies. And as I say that, perhaps your mind goes to where my mind dwelt this past week...the images of bodies lying on the streets of Haiti, those images of bodies--dead bodies--with no one to bury them and no time to bury them, images of bodies being shoveled by bulldozers into mass graves. I thought about those bodies this past week. And I think of images of bodies alive but with crushed limbs...broken bodies on the streets of Haiti. And as I think of that, I think of a story that one of the members of our group told me actually on the bus back from the airport on the way to Lawrenceville. She told the story of a man--a Haitian man--who was carried on a door by his friends up the mountain to Thoman, the village where our group was working, and it was just before they were to pull out from Thoman. These guys brought their friend whose leg was completely broken with a compound fracture that was just hanging on. And it reminded me of the story in Mark 2 where the friends bring a paralytic man on a pallet and they lower him through the roof. Remember that? They tear a hole in the roof where Jesus was because they knew that the man could be healed. They carried this man on a door and the doctors in the group, just as they were to pull out, said, "No, we are going to stay and treat this man." And Dr. Levandowski had one more casting kit. They set his leg using cloth and duct tape and sticks to

set it. I think of that image. And I think of that and I also think of all those other people who didn't have a door or friends or a doctor. All those thousands of people in Haiti in that, what we might call, unnatural disaster that began some 200+ years ago with the unnatural disaster of slavery. And I don't know about you but it breaks my heart and it makes me want to break something. I wrote that in my pastor's letter. It makes me so angry as I think of those images of bodies.

I read a commentary by one of the journalists who was covering Haiti a week or so ago, Brian Williams, who covered the story there and he said it was like no other story he's ever covered. And in his commentary he asks why some children are born into poverty and struggle only to die young and in great pain while my children lead such fortunate lives. He told the story about seeing what he saw in Haiti and coming back here and seeing kids, teenagers, fight over video games and complain about how long the line at Target is. Why is that? I just can't understand it. And it makes me so mad. And you know what? It ought to make us mad. We do well to be mad as we think of those images of bodies dead and broken because...you know what? Sometimes anger can motivate us.

Did you know that as Protestants we understand the love of God? That one aspect of the love of God is actually anger because it means that God cares about what's wrong in the world. And we ought to care about what's wrong in the world. We ought to get angry because our anger connects us with the pain of those people and we cannot forget that. So I see--I remember--I think about images of bodies, dead and broken, on the streets of Haiti and I ask why and I get mad.

And then I think of another image that's very much in contrast with those images: the bodies of our loved ones returning to us...the image of those beloved cherished people coming through the doors at JFK airport. How joyful, how utterly, utterly joyful that was to welcome them back. I'll never forget the hand of Kris Deni on the back of Rich Levandowski's head embracing him. The bodies of loved ones returning and embracing in that joy--in that utter joy. My pride at this group that they were there to be able to help people...that somehow some strange providence that we cannot understand at this point I think brought them there to help people and they rose to the occasion. They were put in the fire and they were not burned...or they are making sense of that experience as best they can...and I am so proud of them. And so I think of those bodies embracing in reunion and I hold in contrast those other groups who were not so fortunate.

I'm not willing to give up on the providence of God but I'm having a hard time understanding why our group came back whole and without blemish and other groups just like ours didn't--who had many members who did not come back. I don't understand. What does the Gianacaci family in Hopewell think about God's providence as they look for the body of their daughter Christine still in Haiti? What do the people of Haiti who have lost loved ones think of the providence of God?

Perhaps it's well to remember a line from Louise's sermon last week--we were in synch, I think, on this thought--that maybe the best question right now is not "why?" but "what next?" We have work to do that's true and let's do theology later. And yet maybe there's just a little bit of theology to do right now as we think about what it means to be the church, as we think about what it means to be right here, right now in these pews preaching this gospel. And so as I think about that I think of another image of the body...of a body. It's a very ancient image. It's an image with which I think most of us, if you've been around church biz for any length of time, are very familiar. It's the image that Paul uses to describe the church. Paul says the church is a body. And we talk about that so often we can lose just what a powerful and radical image it is. Maybe it's not even an image. I think Paul says that's what it is--it's a body. The church is a body--a body that's alive and we're a part of it. We're connected because we're a body. Each of

us has a different thing to offer in this body. I've felt that so strongly last week as we were scrambling to respond to this thing. Everybody did their thing and we were church together. We felt that in a way that we usually don't. Everybody offered their special gift and we were connected to each other because we are a body and we need each other. And it's so powerful and apt what Paul says--if we understand that we are in a body, and it's important to say that the church doesn't just have a body, like somebody is controlling us. The church is a body. And what makes that body alive is the spirit of Christ. And when one member suffers everybody suffers.

I felt that so powerfully last Sunday. It felt in a strange, paradoxical way, like Easter. People we hadn't seen in years came back...some of them are still here today. It's so wonderful because I think they felt they were part of this body. Our members were out there. We all had a shared experience of the anxiety of this moment...reading the internet and the website and stuff on our members. It's interesting to think of that word in its somatic sense, isn't it?--A bodily sense. Our members were in Haiti and we felt part of them and they felt a part of us. So we came together as a body and were connected. Whose body? It's Christ's body. Do we realize that? That we are the body of Christ? As St. Theresa of Avila has written in her famous poem: *"Christ has no other body than yours/ no hands and feet but yours/ Christ's are the eyes with which he looks with compassion out onto the world."* We are the body of Christ. But is it possible that this body is even bigger than we can imagine? It extends beyond those people who were in Haiti last week. Is it possible that it includes the Gianacaci family and the Haitians who are dying, because we're all connected in a body?

And here's the weird thing about Christian faith, the mystical part of it...what connects us? The strangest thing--suffering. I think of that and I think of another image of a body...that of the broken body of our Lord...Jesus on the cross. It's the strange thing that that's where we meet. Humankind meets on the cross...that suffering of Christ which stands for every human being's suffering. Christ on the cross we must think of when we think of those people on the streets in Haiti, dead or broken. The mystery of the Christian faith is this...that suffering connects us in this body.

Here's another image I want to offer to you this morning...the image of two bodies embracing. The bodies of two women weeping together--one from our group and another who had just lost her husband in the earthquake the day before. They are weeping together. The woman's name is Renee. She's telling the story of her husband's death. Her husband's name was Ben. She and her husband came to Haiti as Lutheran seminary students. Working on a project with a Lutheran church in Haiti, they were staying at the St. Joseph's Home for Boys when the earthquake happened. And they were on the third floor of a five story building on the floor that contains the Resurrection Dance Theater. When the earthquake happened, Renee and Ben's cousin John were at one part of the room next to the wall away from Ben who was in the center. And he grabbed a pillar and they watched the building crumble upon him. And when the earthquake was over they found themselves in an air pocket and they called out. And they went to find Ben and they found him--they heard him, they didn't see him--singing a hymn. One verse of the hymn was the last that they heard of Ben--Renee's husband. And they searched for hours and hours for him and couldn't get to him and realized that they had to leave his body behind. And so they went to the embassy and told that story to the people in our group who shared the pain of that story of her and her husband's cousin. And by sharing the pain and weeping tears together about their story, they became members of that group. They became part of a body together and actually they went back on the same plane with our group. Some of the members of our group went to the memorial service on Friday. They became members of the same body connected through the shared experience of suffering, because we're all connected through this

body. And we realize when we're in a body that when one suffers, all suffer. And so we have to consider this business of being Christian. Is this body of which we're a part big enough to contain the pain of our neighbors in Hopewell, the Gianacaci family? Is it big enough to contain the pain of Ben's family? Is it big enough to feel the pain of the people in Haiti? Because we need to make sure we feel that and stay connected with them in this body.

Paul writes about another image of the body. Right after this section in I Corinthians, he talks about what it is going to be like when we leave this one...this physical one...what happens when we pass the dividing line between this life in the flesh and what comes after. And he says you know what? That life is bodily, too. It's like a seed has to die to give birth to something other, something new. He says life in that realm is bodily. We have a body in the resurrection. It's a spiritual body not subject to being crushed or corruption or age. I think about that and I think about the end of Dante's poem. And I'm sorry I have to talk about it today. I always talk about hell, which is so interesting, but nobody ever talks about heaven. The image of heaven...you know what it is? It's a white rose. That's an image for the body of Christ. And you know what the white rose is composed of? The spiritual bodies of the saints sitting together and they form a white rose. And what are they doing? They're singing a hymn of praise eternally to God. They're singing. Like Ben was singing. And I think about that. And I think about a story I read in one of the reports from the missionaries who were there in Haiti that talked about what the Haitians do every night after the sun goes down. They sing hymns. They're living in fields covered by sheets and tarps and they sing hymns until midnight and they go to sleep. And then they wake up at dawn and they do liturgy...they worship and they sing. It seems to me that they know that other image of the body which is the risen body of Christ...the risen body of the Christ who rose again from the dead...that body of which we're a part and they're a part. They know that in the singing, I think.

Haiti will be rebuilt. Resurrection will happen in Haiti and we will be a part of it. We will be subject to moral cowardice if we are not a part of it. The work we are called to do as a church community is more important now than ever...to do the work with Pastor Luc, who is going to rebuild his churches in Haiti. That is so important. We're not going to solve the problem of poverty. We need to get clear about that. Jesus in his mission statement, the first words at the beginning of his ministry, didn't say, "I've got a new social program to solve poverty." No, he said, "I have come to bring good news. God's anointed me to bring good news to the poor." That is what we are called to do. Our work is to be part of the resurrection song of which those Haitians singing in an open field are already a part. Our job is to bear witness to the risen body of Christ of which we are a part. You are a part of it. Everything you do, we do. Here's a little tiny bit of what I was going to say. From polishing the brass to sitting in a boring committee meeting to writing that check which is--believe me--important. It's all a part of being in this body and it's all important. The folks who went to Haiti did a big thing, but all of this is connected in this body. And you're a part of it...the risen body of Christ. And if the people of Haiti can sing with their voices and their bodies, we have to join the song. We have to sing with them. Amen.

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