

3. Members of the Body - Belonging, Identity, and the Church

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Location: St George's, Battery Point

Series: Being Human

Texts: Ruth 1.1-19, Ephesians 2.1-22

Growing up as an only child I sometimes wanted to be part of a bigger family. So it was great when I married Claire. She is one of 4 siblings, she has some step siblings, there's multiple aunts and uncles and an annual get together of the many cousins and their families. I recently discovered that I was not included in a family group chat on WhatsApp for Claire's mum and siblings. I felt hurt at being left out. Even though I've married in, they are the only siblings I've got. So they were kind enough to open it up to partners. I have to say, I'm not sure how I feel about the decision, as there is a constant stream of messages that it's hard to keep up!

It's a deep need we all have - to belong. To be part of a family where we are known and loved. We know families are not perfect. They can be places where those we love the most, wound us deeply. We know having a loving stable family offers children the best chance for a healthy and happy life. Those who don't have families find it very difficult to navigate life. It is a great tragedy when a family breaks down.

One of the implicit moral obligations of our day is that of *authenticity*. "Be true to yourself." The story we are told is that the "real me" resides deep within myself, and that I have an obligation to discover that and then live it out. But the truth is that we are relational beings. We're made for relationships. It's only through relationships that we find who we are. Indeed to not have meaningful relationships with people who know us and love us is to have an unstable and insecure sense of self. We are dependent creatures, and from the perspective of the Bible and the experience of the church through the ages, no matter how deeply we peer into ourselves, we will find that we are already known and loved by the God who made us. And yet, the human condition is one where we are estranged, alienated from God and from each other, fearful, envious, at war with each other, at war with ourselves, at war with God. It is into this situation that Christ has come. If we are relational beings, he has come to restore our broken relationships with God and with each other.

In this 3rd sermon on Being Human we're exploring two questions of human experience - who am I and where do I belong? The question of identity and the question of belonging go hand in hand. I want to suggest that in the Christian faith these are not answered in the

abstract, but concretely and tangibly in Baptism and the Church. If Christ has come to redeem our fallen humanity, then baptism is where that story becomes my own personal story, the story of who I am, and the Church becomes my family, the community in which I learn to live a fully human life.

Church

To counterbalance the individualism of our culture, let's begin with the Church. In Romans 5 the apostle Paul describes Jesus as the new Adam. He is the head and start of a new humanity. Where Adam disobeyed God and so came under the curse of death, Jesus obeyed God and so brought the gift of life. The Church is the body of Christ. It shares in his risen life. Jesus is the head of the body, the source of its life, the one who directs and guides the Church. Jesus is no longer personally present on earth, but the Church, his body is.

In Ephesians 2 Paul interweaves one picture upon another to describe the church. He takes as a theme reconciliation, and he looks at the great racial divide in the ancient world between Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles. (Gentiles just means the nations.) The Jews were God's chosen people. They had been given the covenant of circumcision. They had been given God's law. Everyone else, the Gentiles, and that's you and me unless you're Jewish, we were alienated and separate from God's covenant promises. But, we read in verse 13, "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, **15** by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations."

Paul has in mind here the temple in Jerusalem. The temple was a place where you came to meet with God. There was a court for the Gentiles at the front of the temple, but they couldn't go inside. Archaeologists have found this inscription on the wall separating the Gentile court from the rest of the temple: "No man of another nation is to enter within the barrier and enclosure around the temple. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows."¹ This was literally the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile. And what does Paul say? Christ has destroyed the barrier. He himself is our peace. Paul continues: "His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, **16** and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. **17** He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. **18** For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit."

¹ Quoted in Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, Eerdmans, 2003: 562

One new humanity in Christ out of the two. Making peace in his one body by reconciling both to God through the cross. This is magnificent stuff. What was true for ancient divides is true for every barrier that separates, every dividing wall of hostility. Hostile tribes are reconciled in the body of Christ as his people live out that reconciliation accomplished on the cross. This is why Paul can say that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, because we are all one in Christ.² Whatever ethnic, cultural, linguist, class, gender divides there are, in the body of Christ, the church, these are set aside. That is not to say these aspects of our identity are erased. Not at all. The picture in Revelation 7.9 is people “from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” That is to say the diversity of our cultures and languages, our differences, are preserved and treasured in the church, but, and here is the crucial point, they are no longer a source of division and conflict. Rather our differences are coordinated in worship.

Our society is becoming increasingly polarised with people retreating to their different tribes. Here in the church we have the God given resources to overcome this polarisation and find true and lasting unity in diversity. So many of the instructions we find in the New Testament are how we can do that. Things like loving our neighbours. Bearing with one another in love. Forgiving as Christ has forgiven us. Putting off falsehood. Speaking the truth in love. Controlling our bodies. Getting rid of bitterness and anger. Not that we do this perfectly, by no means! But as we obey Christ as our head, so we live out his peace, his *shalom* in his body such that we become more and more the new humanity that Christ is making, the new humanity that our world so desperately needs.

In his superb little book on Baptism, Peter Leithart writes, “The New Testament describes the church as the family of the Father, the body of the incarnate Son, the temple of the Holy Spirit.”³ We’ve seen just a little of what it means that the church is the body of Christ. What does it mean that the Church is the family of God the Father? Through Christ we are adopted in God’s family and made children of God. In Galatians 4 we read that we share in the relationship of the eternal Son with the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴ As we saw last week in Hebrews 2, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. This is the true spiritual reality. God has saved us to be members of his family. That means if you’re a Christian, the people in the pews next to you are your sisters and brothers. It means we treat each other like family. We respect our elders. We treat each other with purity. We’re there to

² Galatians 3.28

³ Peter Leithart, *Baptism: A Guide to Life from Death*, Lexham Press, 2021: 4

⁴ Galatians 4.6-7

help, to come alongside, to care for. It means that wherever you go in the world you have family. It means even if you've had to give up family for the sake of Christ, you are given a new family. It means that no matter how good or how messed up the circumstances of your birth family are, you do have a real family, God's family. This is where you belong.

And just like you don't get to choose who is in your biological family, so you don't get to choose who is in your spiritual family. God does, and he calls people in every circumstance to join his family. We meet each other and have each other only through the grace of God shown to each one of us in Christ, not through any merit or virtue of our own. But in Christ we do have each other, for all eternity. As children, we bear the family likeness. We're called to imitate God our Father and Christ our elder brother. In this way the church becomes a school of humanity, where we learn what it looks like to be truly human and how to live this out.

Paul joins the family picture with the picture of a temple in Ephesians 2.19:

“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, **20** built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. **21** In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. **22** And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

The Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. God lives in his Church. That means he is here right now. We are joined to each other by the Spirit. One of the key words the New Testament uses again and again of the Spirit is *koinonia*. It means communion, sharing, participation. In the Spirit we have communion with each other and with God. The bond between us is nothing less than God himself. Every member is given gifts by the Spirit to use for the building up of the body. No member is useless or unwanted. Every member is valuable. When one part suffers, the whole suffers. When one part rejoices, the whole rejoices.

If you want to see God at work in the world, look at the Church. Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden ... [so] let your light shine before all men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”⁵ The Church is the greatest and most effective volunteer organisation that the world has ever seen. More people are serving the poor, helping in soup kitchens, working to end human trafficking, help people escape prostitution, working to change the lives of criminals, and much more around the world through the Church than any other organisation. Hospitals, universities, care for the

⁵ Matthew 5.14-15

disabled, women's suffrage, human rights, the abolition of slavery, the preservation of minority languages, mutual consent as essential in sex, the profession of nursing, and the list goes on, all these are the fruit of the church and its members at work in the world.

If you want to experience God at work in your life, then come to church. The Spirit is at work in his temple. He binds us together and transforms us through common rituals we share. Through baptism, the Lord's Supper, through common prayer, confession and absolution, through the reading and preaching of God's word, through our songs and praises. To say you're a Christian and to never come to the Lord's table, to not meet with God's family, to not use your gifts in Christ's body, means you're cutting yourself off from communion with Christ. As the 3rd century African Cyprian put it, "No one can have God as their Father who does not have the Church as their mother." *Koinonia* means participation, and it's hard to do that when you're not here! Now of course sickness and frailty can make it hard to get here on a Sunday, but don't make it dumb things like sport or a sleep in. The single greatest investment you can make in your spiritual health is to come on a Sunday to worship with your spiritual family. We all need spiritual nourishment to live the lives God calls us to in the world. As you give yourself to that weekly routine you'll see the Spirit change and grow you.

Baptism

The Church is the family of God the Father. And just like you are born into a biological family, so you become a member of God's family through spiritual re-birth. Jesus says, "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."⁶ Baptism with water is the external and visible sign given by Jesus himself that the church uses to point to the internal and unseen work of the Holy Spirit giving spiritual rebirth. In Ephesians we saw our natural state this side of the fall: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, **2** in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient."

We're all children of Adam. We too listen to the uncanny lies that whisper in our ears. We participate in and perpetuate Adam's disobedience. We're in the kingdom of darkness, cut off from the source of life, spinning out towards death.

Christ has defeated sin and death through the cross. He offers forgiveness, reconciliation with God and new life. But for us to participate in the life of the New Adam, that old way of life has to die. So as we go down into the waters of baptism, we plunge into Jesus' death. As we come out of the water we leave the old life in the watery tomb and rise to life, cleansed and made new, reborn. Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has

⁶ John 3.5

gone, the new has come!”⁷ This is what the Spirit does in baptism, uniting us to Christ such that his death becomes our death, and his life our life. We are made members of his body, the Church. By the Spirit we share in his very relationship as the eternal Son with the Father. The second century church father Tertullian wrote that by baptism we are, “being restored to God, to the likeness of him who had been aforesaid in God’s image.”⁸

In baptism, the story of Jesus is made personal. It is your story. It is the Gospel with your name on it. You died with Christ. You are made alive with Christ. You are washed clean. You are forgiven. You receive the Holy Spirit. God’s future is now yours. And all this is the gift of God to be received with faith. Your baptism is God’s pledge of all these things. The promise of his gift. A sign to strengthen you in your faith.

Whenever somebody asks me to do a christening, I tell them where this word comes from. Because baptism means new birth into the family of God, traditionally when people were baptised, be they infants or adults, they were given a new name, their *Christian* name, the name by which they would be known from this point forward. That’s why baptism is sometimes called a christening. It’s also why we often call your first name your *Christian* name, even if most people are no longer Christians! I share this because it points to the fact that your baptism now defines who you are - a loved child of God, a new creation, a member of the body of Christ. You are what God says you are, and no one else, not the bullies at school or work, not the insults of the world, not the destructive thoughts in your mind, not your feelings or desires, in baptism you belong to God who declares indelibly and without reservation that he loves you. And second baptism tells you how you are to live - as an obedient child of God, a disciple of Christ.

All of us long to be known and loved, to have a name and a family. In baptism God names you as his child. In the Church, God gives you a family. For those of you who are baptised, let this define your life. Rest in your Father’s love. Live the life of Christ that he calls you to in his body. If you’ve not been baptised, or if you’re not sure where you stand with Jesus, then why not make this a day you declare you’re all in? He will give you life and a family and a future. Come and have a chat with me, I’d love to help you make that step.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5.17

⁸ Quoted in Leithart, 26