

WE ARE THE BODY

A sermon by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.

Central United Methodist Church

July 25, 2010

(Colossians 2:6-15) As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, {7} rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. {8} See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. {9} For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, {10} and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. {11} In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; {12} when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. {13} And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, {14} erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. {15} He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

GOD IN CHRIST

Somewhere in my files there is a cartoon picturing a lone religious pilgrim with a staff, hooded cowl, a long beard and a haggard look. He is at a fork in the road where there is a sign. One arrow points toward, "*The meaning of life.*" The other arrow points in the opposite direction to "*Cheese and Crackers.*" Which way should he go? Should he take the road that will help him answer the question that great thinkers have tried solve for thousands of years or should he travel towards the "*Cheese and Crackers?*"¹ I would suggest that if the pilgrim believes in the incarnation--God in Christ--then he will not hesitate. He will head straight for the cheese and crackers where others are already gathered to

¹Thomas H. Troeger, *A Spirituality of Materiality* (The Living Pulpit, April-June, 2006), 12.

eat, talk, perhaps sing and dance. I believe Jesus would choose "*Cheese and Crackers*" because that's where the people would be.

If we believe Christ is the Son of God (The Incarnation), then we don't need some vague abstract concept or complicated collection of words or thoughts to give us meaning. Meaning is found in the life, love, hope, peace, and grace of God in Jesus Christ. Jesus physically embodied God's presence in the real world. Jesus, like us, had a heart that pumped blood and lungs that inhaled and exhaled air. Jesus was not a spirit that floated above the earth. Jesus had a body like ours with feet that pounded the earth and a stomach that growled when it was hungry. While Jesus did spend time in the synagogue and other religious place, Jesus mirrored God in his words and actions. He touched and spoke to lepers, went home to eat with tax collectors, attended weddings and funerals. He spoke to 5,000 people on a hillside and then he fed them supper. Everywhere I look in the Gospel story, Jesus is the presence of God in people's lives. Yes, Jesus would choose cheese and crackers.

In Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw's book, *The Externally Focused Quest*, (a book I'm currently using with the vision team) they use the metaphor of choosing the aisle seat or the window seat on an airplane. Frequent flyers, unlike occasional flyers, always choose the aisle seat so they can exit the plane quickly. Frequent flyers have their own way of doing things and know the ins and outs of airports. They even have their own language which is unfamiliar to occasional flyers.

The same is true for aisle seat churches. In aisle seat churches, members have their own language. It's like a secret code. They use words that

don't compute with the unchurched or dechurched, words like *fellowship, sanctification, and righteousness*. Aisle seat churches also have their own way of doing things and seeing a world that makes perfect sense to them and other people who are inside the circle. Anyone coming in from outside feels left out unless they to learn to speak the language and follow the code. Rusaw and Swanson say,

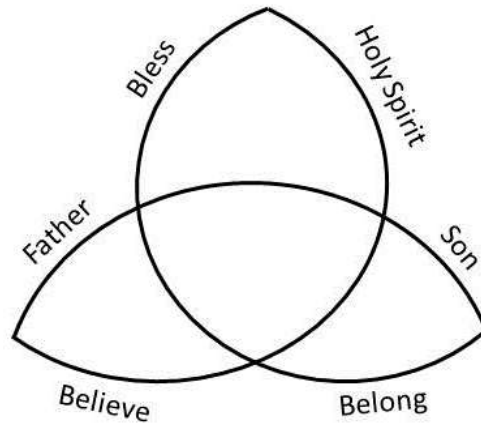
*Aisle seat churches are almost exclusively preoccupied with what is happening inside the four walls of the church; window-seat churches, by contrast, have a focus that is external to the church, and their vision extends far beyond the four walls. If you want to be the best church in the community, choose the aisle seat (in first class if you can), but if you want to be the best church FOR THE COMMUNITY, slide over to the window seat.*²

Sliding over the window seat means making a choice about being the Body of Christ outside the four walls of the church. This is what Paul is encouraging the Colossians to do. There are those in Colossi who want to sit on the aisle. The aisle sitters are making up dietary laws that will include a few and exclude many. They also want Christians to restrict what festivals and civic events they will attend. Those having a hard time keeping the rules find that they are shunned or even banished from the church.

THE BODY OF CHRIST FOR ALL

²Eric Swanson and Rick Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 28.

I hesitate to use this quote but I think it speaks to what Paul is trying to convey to the early church: *"Don't go to church this Sunday, be the church."* What I'm talking about is probably better understood using the Celtic knot.



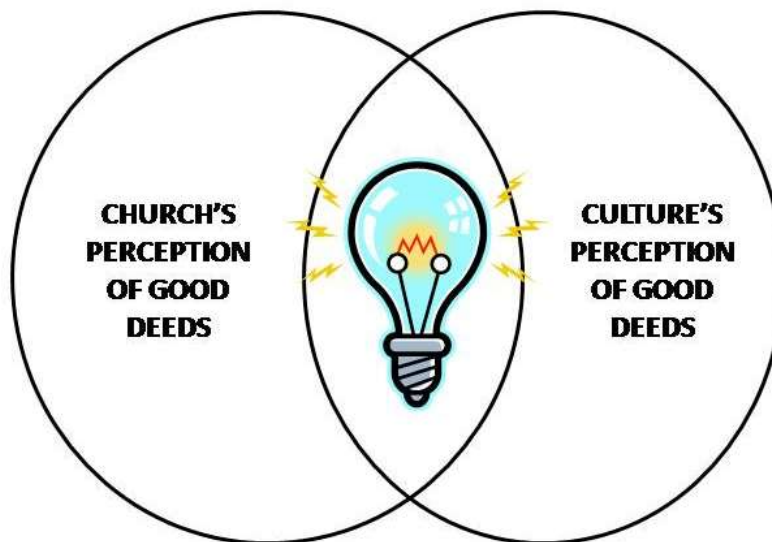
The knot is often used to represent the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It can also be used to represent our journey in the Christian faith. Each of us is created to believe, to belong and to bless. Believing is our connection to Christ, belonging is our connection to like-minded believers, and blessing is our ministry to a broken world. It's important to understand that all three of these elements are essential for healthy Christian living. It is also a part of what it means to be the body of Christ.

The point is that we are responsible for being Christ to more than our church friends. We are to be the body of Christ to a world desperate for something other than consumerism, pleasure for pleasure's sake, injustice, war, racism and self-centeredness. People need to know that we care about them in their situation and they are accepted and loved as Christ would love them.

JOIN HANDS

Doing this means we have to make the effort to join hands with those in our community and world. The best way I know to do that is to find common ground. What is it that we are both concerned about. If you start asking around, people might tell you they are concerned about the schools, the homeless, abuse in our homes, or the environment.

Hopefully the church is concerned about these issues as well and this becomes the common ground. Maybe this diagram helps to visualize what I am talking about:



Reasoning with people about the Christian faith does not work. Some people will not come to faith no matter what the evidence is. When we are the Body of Christ in our community and the world, others see our good works and it is at that point that we can have a conversation about faith. Often people want what we have especially when they see us doing good works and finding joy in it.

Dr. J. Howard Olds, former pastor of Brentwood UMC, tells about a young teenage girl in one of his former congregations that lost her arm in an accident. She was so embarrassed at the handicap that she refused to go to church or school for a whole year. Finally, she agreed to try Sunday school. Her mother called the teacher and asked that nothing be done to call attention to Jamie's missing arm. The teacher agreed. But he got sick and a substitute led the class on inviting friends to church. At the end of class, he asked the students to join him in the jingle we all know, "***Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and there are the people.***" It was enough to make Jamie cry until a thirteen-year-old boy in class, realized what she was feeling. He dropped down beside her and put one hand against her good hand and together they demonstrated what a real church is all about.

We are called NOT to tell people about the church but to be the church. We do that by joining hands with as many people as we can.

BE THE BODY

Dr. Pierce Harris, former pastor of First United Methodist Church in Atlanta, was playing golf with one of his church members who was retired from the Air Force. They were standing on the golf course when a military jet flew over. "***How fast is she going?***" Dr. Pierce asked his friend. "***Oh, about 500 miles per hour,***" he replied.

A little later another much larger and slower plane flew over the golf course. "***How fast is that one going,***" Dr. Pierce asked. "***That's one of the old plans we used for search and rescue. It's only going about 150 miles per hour.*** Before Dr. Pierce could say anything, the man pondered,

"Isn't it silly? We go 500 hundred miles per hour to hurt somebody and 150 miles per hour to save a life or to help someone." It should never be that way in the church especially if we are trying to represent the Body of Christ to the community and world.

As I think about the community of faith at Central, I can only smile at the ways in which we are being the Body to this community. The list is too long to cover everything this morning but let me lift up a few examples. Hopefully you will be encouraged to join the fun of being the body of Christ with your friends.

- **Rock the Block**-last year we held our 4th annual community party. Some 1,500 people from our community came to enjoy being together and to discover that the people of Central United Methodist Church Care. This year's Rock the Block is on Saturday, August 21. It's a great place to see the Body of Christ in Action.
- Many people at Central church are being the Body of Christ at
 - **The Uptown Shelter**
 - **Turning Point**
 - **Health Quest**
 - **Crisis Assistance**
- **Building Handicapped Ramps**
- **Weekend backpack snacks for kids**
- **Weekday Children's Ministry**
- **Sunshine Class**
- **Upward**
- **Youth/Missions**

- **Sunday School at Union Park**
- **Monroe Elementary and Middle School Uniform drive**
- **Angel Food**

I'm glad you came to church this morning but I would ask that you go be the church this week. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.