

August 27, 2017
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

“Ordinary Compassion”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 12:1-8 ~ Matthew 16:13-20

I think many people in our society may be looking for God in all the wrong places. They look for God in the “perfect” church, which tends to be very large ... with a smorgasbord of programs so broad that everyone in the family can find something they like. Others look for God in some spectacular, supernatural experience ... whether a “miracle” or a special vision ... or a unique calling. Others look for God by turning inward and shutting out “the world” as a dangerous place full of hostile people. But I don’t think any of those places are the place to look for God. I think we are meant to look for God in the ordinary compassion we share with the people around us.

I don’t know any famous people, but I *know* people who *know* famous people. Dale Bishop’s friend, Paul Knitter, wrote a wonderful book called *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*. Paul Knitter is a Catholic theologian who’s lived out a dialogue with Buddhism for 40 years ... primarily through his relationship with his wife, who is a practicing Buddhist. One of his major themes is the idea that there are some significant connections between Christianity and Buddhism. He uses those connections as a way of re-framing Christian faith where it seems to have gone astray ... as in where to look to find God.

One of the primary teachings of Buddhism is reflected in the greeting, “Namasté.” It’s a greeting that means, “the light within me honors the light within you.” It seems to me that someone who greets you by saying “Namasté” is in effect saying, “the goodness in me acknowledges and honors the goodness in you.” And that applies to everyone we meet. It’s not a matter of applying this to only “good people,” because Buddhism teaches that everyone we meet has all the same goodness that is in us ... regardless of their faults and failures. It’s almost as if it is the reverse of our Christian idea of fallenness ... that I must acknowledge that I am just as fallen as evildoers and therefore have the capacity to do the same. Buddhists turn that around and honors the light ... the goodness in everyone.

When you have that kind of mindset about other people, it changes the way you relate to people. In a very real sense ... when you can recognize and honor the goodness in others ... you are recognizing and honoring the fact that we all *belong* to one another. In the same way, the Apostle Paul talks about the church being the body of Christ ... and therefore “individually we are members one of another” (Rom. 12:5), which simply means that each of us *belongs* to one another.

The Church at Rome apparently needed a lesson in unity. The lengths that Paul goes to in establishing that Jews as well as Gentiles will be forgiven and accepted by God points to conflict within and around the Church at Rome. Paul needed a positive metaphor to express the kind of unity that is Christ's hope for the Church.

I have to wonder what made Paul think of this “body” metaphor ... not only here in Romans ... but also as a prominent metaphor in 1st Corinthians. Maybe it was his awareness of how fragile the body was in his first-century context. Well, maybe, because the body is a fragile thing, even in our 21st century context. We should be grateful for it. We should take better care of it. We should realize all its parts need one another ... and need to work together to survive and thrive in an often hostile environment.

Maybe Paul thought of the body as a metaphor for the church when his mind wandered to visits he had paid in the past to shrines to Asclepius in various cities he had visited. Asclepius was the god of healing. If you had an infirmity, you presented him with an offering of honey cakes ... then slept overnight in the temple. The god would appear to you in a dream and heal the affected body part. Then you would have a terra cotta model of it made and place it on display at the shrine next to the bathing pool. The visitor, as they sat by the pool at Asclepius’ shrine, could contemplate the body parts on the wall ... replicas of all kinds of body parts supposedly healed by the god (heads, hands, feet, arms, legs, eyes, and ears). And in his mind's eye, perhaps the thought appeared: "What life do any of the members have unless they are joined together in a living body?"

Who know why he chose it. But whatever made him think of it, the body is the perfect metaphor for ecclesial unity! It's far better than family or team. You can take a break from being a member of a team. You can go on vacation without your family. But you can't take a break from the parts of your body.

Several years ago, a clergy friend of mine asked me to serve as the guest preacher at her church in a small town in Texas. My friend introduced me and then the acolytes came forward to light the candles. They were two girls, about ten years old. One ... a smiling, meek looking girl ... the other ... obviously the lead sled dog acolyte ... had a look of determination and singleness of purpose on her face. This candle lighting was going to be done right! She had some trouble with her wick, but deftly trimmed it and got the job done and then came to sit down. In their tradition, the acolytes remain seated in the chancel throughout the service. Unfortunately, my host had forgotten ... that with my being there, the front lineup was one seat short. The lead sled dog acolyte stood in front of me ... looked up at me, and said, "You're in my seat." My friend came over and tried to lead her away and suggested that both girls share one seat. My acolyte friend looked disapprovingly at me. Clearly this was not acceptable. I thought, "Well, there is only one solution here." I went down into the congregation, picked up a chair and took it up for her.

Maybe she was just a bratty little girl who needed to learn to respect her elders. Judging by the expression in her mother's eye when she came up after the service, I suspect that was her take on the scene. But for me she was a reminder that every member of the body deserves a front row seat. The eye can't say to the hand, I don't need you. The head can't say to the foot, I don't need you.

When Paul says, "You are the body of Christ," he doesn't mean that the church literally is Christ's body in every way ... so as to be without error or flaw. He means that the church is a body that belongs to Christ. The Church is a body that gives Christ a face to the world ... his voice ... his hands ... and his feet. This is why ... when Paul was persecuting Christians before

his conversion ... Jesus said to him on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" We are all imperfect members, but we *all* belong to Christ. We are all members of one body, and God cares for each of us and desires for us to care for one another. God yearns for us to be grateful for others' gifts ... to feel their pain and to participate in their healing.

Our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ are a journey *from* seeing ourselves as independent bodies ... *to* seeing ourselves as members of the body of Christ. It is a process of living into our identity ... not as self-contained bodies ... but as members of Christ's body. We grow into that identity as we grow in empathy and compassion for other members of Christ's body. When another member of the body suffers ... we feel it too and offer encouragement and support. When all members of a group relate to one another in this way ... the result is a healthy body!

Though Paul was talking about the church, he was still stuck in the mindset of avoiding "the world" as a hostile place. But I think there's something to be said for applying this idea of a "body" to the whole human family. As beloved children of the one creator God ... and brothers and sisters of the one loving redeemer ... there is much to point us to the conclusion that we *all* belong to one another. When that is the case, how can we not acknowledge and honor the goodness in each other? How can we not relate to one another with compassion and kindness?

This mindset changes the way we live ... and in a very real sense, it changes us. It reminds me again of Paul talking about being "transformed by the renewing of your mind" so that you may discern the will of God. What could be more appropriate to the will of God than relating to everyone you meet in a way that expresses God's compassion for us all!

But what does all this have to do with the original question of where we look for God? I think one of the things that happens to you when you begin to relate to everyone you encounter with God's compassion is that you begin to become aware that God's compassion is constantly surrounding us all. We find the answer to the question where to look for God in the way we relate to one another. As it turns out, loving other people is what it means to know and love God. Sounds biblical, doesn't it?

When we look at everyone we encounter as a beloved brother or sister ... and recognize that all the goodness in us is also present in them ... we find that God is there. When we relate to the people around us with compassion ... we find God's compassion surrounding us all. That's where we look for God. Not in the busyness of a big church ... or in some supernatural experience ... but in ordinary, everyday compassion towards other people. We find God's love waiting for us in a hug from a friend ... or in the embrace of a child or a parent. We find God's love waiting for us in the satisfaction of a good day's work. We find God's love waiting for us as we extend ordinary compassion to another human being who is hurting ... for whatever reason. When we offer simple respect and kindness to those we meet, *we find God* who is constantly surrounding us with compassion.

Today we celebrate the 130th anniversary of our beloved church. You only have to look at the bulletin board that Sharon made, and the contributions of SAG in our sanctuary this morning to witness our history. We must give thanks to all those who came before us. And I give thanks for their legacy of compassion that are the hallmarks of our church ... because we continue to be a church of compassion. This is born out in our contributions to NATH and Caritas ... our Melody

of Compassion for the needy ... our generous response to refugee relief ... our Befrienders and flower ministries ... in all that we do for those struggling with addictions ... by our contributions to the Vilas County Food Pantry and the Salvation Army and the Humane Society ... our gifts of hand-made knitted and crocheted items to warm the hearts of many ... our Cranberry Fest Luncheon whose proceeds are used to serve others, as well as contributing to our scholarship funds ... our Soles 4 Soles and Hope Phones collection ... all of our monthly collection drives ... not mention the many, many acts of kindness that we do for one another in time of need. It is evident in the loving care that SAG provides our sanctuary ... and the mission driven leadership of our Council.

During our celebration brunch, you will have an opportunity to decide how you can best serve our church in the coming year. Please take the time to do so. Perhaps you would like to read scripture, make announcements, serve as an usher, bake bread or prepare the communion elements. Maybe you're interested in leading a bible study or working with children. There are lots and lots of choices, and you can sign up for as many things as you would like, as many times as you would like. The work of many hands will allow us to serve as seed-throwers and fire-starters ... hope-peddlers and grace-givers ... risk-takers and dreamers, young and old ... in the way we link arms to empower the poor, strengthen the weak, embrace the outcast, seek the lost. Yes, in the way we serve together, play together, worship together, and live life together ... now and in the future.

For these acts of compassion, and many, many more I rejoice that we are a church who, in the words of Ephesians 4:2, "*prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up,*" Well done good and faithful servants!

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God, who calls us to be the church in this place and time, we give you thanks for the work you have done in this place. We seek to remember and honor the past, not so much to glorify it, but to learn from it; not so much to venerate its saints, but to gain wisdom from their successes and their failures; not so much to seek to live out their dreams nor fulfill their goals, but to build upon past visions to imagine new ones. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.