

In the Gospels, there are many examples of how Jesus understood his ministry. One of the ideas that Jesus had about his messianic work is that he came to heal. He was a physician who came for the sick (Luke 5:31). I'm sure that if I ask, many of you would have testimonies about God's healing on a personal level. But, what about healing in a social level?

What do you think?

Are we sick as a society as well?

Do we need healing on a social level too?

Where do you see symptoms of a social illness?

Does this social illness have a name?

Is Jesus a social healer too?

Can Jesus' ministry bring healing to our society as a whole?

How?

If we want to understand how Jesus' message brought social salvation, I think it would be a better option to re-read the Gospel with that perspective in mind. It is easier to grasp an idea presented in a narrative way than in an abstract way. However, when I read First Corinthians Chapter twelve, the passage suggested for the Fellowship Sunday, this Sunday, I notice an interesting aspect of the text that I have not seen before.

During Christmas break, I was reading a book called "The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice, and Promise" by Allan G. Johnson. This book has been my first introduction to sociology, and I only read the first chapter, so don't expect a lecture on sociology here. Although, thanks to this book, I noticed the illness, the disease, that Paul is addressing in the passage.

There, Paul is talking to the church in Corinth. The problem of this church is that it became infected with an illness, a disease that almost all social systems have. The problem with this illness is that does not seem like an illness. It seems something so natural in a social system that it is very hard to recognize as an actual illness.

Johnson says that, as individuals, we are always participating in different systems of social life. In the biblical passage, we see that the Christians in Corinth were individuals that were participating in this new system of social life called "the body of Christ." Paul says, in verse twenty-seven, that "now [the Christians in Corinth] are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Obviously,

the church is one of the many systems of social life that the Christians in Corinth were participating in. Another system was the Roman Empire.

For Johnson, social life is neither just the forest nor just the trees, is neither just the individual nor just the system. It's the forest and the trees and how they're related to one another. And this is important if we are going to talk about social illnesses. For example, when I asked you to think about a social illness, many of you probably thought about racism. Racism could be an individual illness, a person can be racist, but it is also a social illness, and we all are in some degree sick of this social illness, just for being part of the American society. Racism is a problem that is neither just about the individual nor just about the system. It's the forest and the trees and how they're related to one another.

For Johnson, a system refers to any collection of elements that are connected in ways that cohere into some kind of whole. We can think of the engine in a car as a system, for example, a collection of parts arranged in ways that make the car "go." We can also think of a family as a system—a collection of elements related to one another in a way that leads us to think of it as a unit. These include things such as the positions of mother, father, wife, husband, parent, child, daughter, son, sister, and brother.

So, according to this passage, what are the elements in this social system called "the body of Christ"?

The body of Christ as a social system has elements such as feet, hands, ears, and eyes. These elements are described as positions and functions in verse twenty-eight. These are apostles, prophets, teachers; deeds of power, gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, and various kinds of tongues.

For Johnson, the elements in a social system also include shared ideas that tie those parts or positions together to make relationships, such as how "good mothers" are supposed to act in relation to children, or what a "family" is and what makes family members "related" to one another as kin.

So, according to this passage, what are these shared ideas that tie those parts or positions together?

Verses twelve and thirteen say: "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."

The people who belong to this social system called "the church," even though they are many members, they have the idea that they are actually one unit. Why? Because they are the "body of Christ," and to be part of this body means that people are baptized in one Spirit, into one body.

It also means that they all drink of one Spirit. Doesn't matter if they are Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, they are one.

In this social system called the church, to have one specific function, and no other, would not make of its members any less part of the body. The verses fifteen and sixteen say: "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."

The people who belong to this social system called "the church," understand that God arranged the functions and the parts, God arranged the members of the body as God chose. Verse eighteen says that God did it because every function of the body is needed. Verse seventeen says: "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?" Because of that, the elements of the body of Christ need to realize the importance of their own functions. Verse twenty one says: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

In the church, the so-called inferior functions, the functions or parts that in other system are less important, are the ones that are indispensable, and therefore, the most respectable ones. In this sense, this social system works contrary to other social systems. The verses twenty-two to twenty-four say: "On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."

The people who belong to this social system understand themselves as one body, and because of that, "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." As verse twenty-six says. And because of that, verse twenty-five points out, "there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."

In that sense, think for a moment about how the elements of this social system called "the body of Christ" are different from other social systems, for example, the American society in general.

Now, what is the illness that Paul is addressing here? What is the disease that the church in Corinth was infected with?

When Paul mentions in verse thirteen that the Christians in Corinth are all one now, he specifically mentions two divisions that are present in other social systems, but because the Church is the body of Christ, these are social disease among the church: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free."

“Jews or Greeks.” – Racism, the prejudice or discrimination on the basis of the belief in the superiority of one race over another it was something normal in other social systems, for example, in the Jewish society and in the Roman Empire. But in the body of Christ, racism is a disease.

“Slaves or free.” - Classism, the prejudice or discrimination on the basis of social class, is also what Paul has in mind when he proclaims this alternative social system that is “the body of Christ.”

But it is very interesting that in the church in Corinth, an illness closely related to these diseases is emerging again. It is the prejudice and discrimination on the basis of social status due to the functions of people in the church.

In the first verses of that Chapter twelve, Paul reminds the church in Corinth that the variety of spiritual gifts that they have are due to the Holy Spirit’s activity on them. The gifts are manifestations of the Spirit and not something that comes from them. It is because of that Spirit that we were all baptized into this body, says Paul.

To believe that one is better or more important because of the role that one has in the Community of Faith contradicts the very base of the social system that is the church. To have the idea that one is superior in the social status within the church is a denial of the shared ideas that hold together the Body of Christ. To think that the social scale present in other social systems it is also present in the church, is to not realize what actually the church is. The point is not that the social ladder is better in the church than in the secular society because the church is spiritual so it does not depend on race or social class. The point is that in this subversive and radical social system that is “the body of Christ” there is no social ladder.

[Story about the social ladder in the Mennonite Church in Quito]

Finally, it is important to note that people participate in systems without being parts of the systems themselves. In this sense, “husband,” “wife”, “mother”, and “father,” are positions in your family, and you are the person who actually occupies those positions. Apostles, prophets, teachers, pastors, deacons, etcetera, are positions in our churches, and we are the persons who actually occupy those positions, but we are not the position. That is why the pastor is also a disciple.

That is a crucial distinction that’s easy to lose sight of. It’s easy to lose sight of because we’re so used to thinking solely in terms of individuals. It’s crucial because it means that people aren’t systems, and systems aren’t people. It’s crucial because the illness that the church in Corinth was suffering wasn’t an individual illness, it couldn’t be healed just by healing individual people. It is a social illness, and as a social illness only can be healed through an alternative social system. In the same way, the many social illnesses that our societies have cannot be healed in an individualistic manner.

However, even though we are part of the church, we are still part of other social systems that are very sick. But we, as individuals, still can choose.

We can take the path of least resistance, that is, to do what we are supposed to do if we want to feel that we belong to that system. To go by its rules and pursue the values it promotes.

Or we can resist. Resist!

People are what make a system “happen.” Without our participation, a system exists only as an idea.

You might say: It is not possible! It is not possible to live outside the social systems that we are entailed! It is not possible to build an alternative social system, with other elements and values that can actually heal us as a society!

Paul response is: it is possible!

You might say: prove it!

Paul response is: Now you are the body of Christ! In the one Spirit you were all baptized! Make that system happen!