

Epiphany 3

1 Corinthians 12.12-31, Luke 4.14-21

Our two NT Passages are pretty familiar. We've likely been hearing them preached since we were young. My guess is that when we hear them read, we have a lot of different scripts running in our heads about what Paul and Luke are saying. When we hear such well-worn Texts, it's sometimes hard to actually hear them because mostly we're just hearing reruns from early interpretations.

I'm naming this so that we can take a moment to turn off those tapes! So, let's hit our *pause* or *stop* buttons. And listen for the counterscript of the Spirit among us.

Listen again to Paul: "For as the body is *one* and has many members, but all the members of that *one* body, being many, are *one* body, so also, Christ. ¹³ For by *one* Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into *one* Spirit."

How many bodies are there? How many spirits?

This repetition of *one* is a counterscript that Paul is writing. As children of *One God*, there is *one* Spirit, *one* Christ, *one* body. And there is *one* baptism into the *one* body.

Now, of course we know this. Intellectually and theologically we know this. But *we don't know it in our bodies and our beings*. We don't *live* this. We don't live as though there is One God, One Spirit, One Christ, One Body. And the people of Corinth weren't living it either.

Listen to Paul's words at the opening of his letter to the Corinthian church:

¹⁰ Now I plead with you, sisters and brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the *same* thing, and that there be *no divisions* among you, but that you be *perfectly joined together* in the *same* mind and in the *same* judgment. ¹¹ For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brothers and sisters...that there are contentions among you.... Is Christ divided? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10–13 NKJV *with Suella changes*)

“There are contentions among you,” says Paul. Indeed, there are quarrels, fights, arguments. In 2,000 years, there are still contentions and divisions among us. Congregations and conference and denominations have been separating themselves from each other for 2,000 years. Even our beloved Mennonite Church has been splintered.

There is a temptation to say, “But, *we* didn’t leave or separate ourselves. *We* stayed.” Or, “We aren’t quarreling here at FoH.” And these may be true. But in the counterscript of One God, One Spirit, One Christ, One Body...if one member leaves, *we* are divided. The body is no longer one. If we *live* into the counterscript of *one*, then *there is no separating ourselves from each other*. Because in one body, *there is no other*. As creatures of One God, in all of creation, there is only *we*. One body.

So, if for 2,000 years we’ve been hearing Paul’s teaching on *one body* and *one Spirit* and we still have divisions, what’s the problem?

Of course this question can’t really be answered. But we can be curious and explore the question.

If we look at the history of contentions in our Mennonite church—whether the debates and divisions about women wearing a head covering, or women in leadership, or divorce and remarriage, or same-sex relationships—we always approach these “issues” as theological issues. And our response to these theological issues is discernment and argument. We go to the Bible and find passages that support our understandings. And we pray and have meetings for a while, trying to sort out what is right and wrong, because right and wrong determine our course of action. And after arguing and discerning and position papers and meetings, some people and congregations eventually leave and the rest stay. Each just a little big smug and self-righteous about being on the right side, shaking our heads at the blindness of the other side. This pattern has repeated itself again and again...just in our lifetimes.

But do you see what we're doing? We're arguing about what we *think*. We're arguing that we are right, that we *know* what is right, assuming that what God wants is for us to be faithful to what is *right*. What we're living out is that being right is more important than being faithful heirs of *One God, One Spirit, One Christ, One Body*. Our behavior makes it clear that we've either forgotten our baptismal vows. Or, we're choosing intentionally or unintentionally to ignore them. Listen again to Paul's words, "For by *one* Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, whether right or wrong—and have all been made to drink into *one* Spirit."

In baptism, one of the vows we make is to renounce sin. The renunciation of sin is more than about actions and behaviors and morality. The sin that we leave behind in baptism is a way of being human that is in rivalry and struggle with each other. It is the sin of separating ourselves from each other. From Adam and Eve to Cain and Abel to Sarah and Hagar, Jacob and Esau and on and on, we see human beings reaching for what belongs to someone else. We want what the other person has. We want more, to be better than the next person, smarter, more special, more important. When we act on that impulse, we are separating ourselves from each other. We are blind to the truth that the well-being of the other person affects my well-being. This way of being human lives as though we are disconnected from each other. And separate from other creatures. Separate from creation. This way of being human believes the lies, the scripts, that tell us we're on our own, "every man for himself," "the survival of the fittest." This humanity argues about whose god is the right god, about whose theology is biblical, whose politics are right. And the list goes on.

But when we enter into the waters of baptism, we die to that way of being human and we are born again into a new humanity, siblings of Jesus, children of *One God*. The waters of baptism don't wash away differences. What *is* washed away is our fear of those differences.

From baptismal waters, *One Spirit* births us into new human beings, members in *One Christ*, *One Body*. And we begin to recognize each other, to *see* each other as parts of ourselves, members of the same humanity, connected to each other in One Body.

This isn't something that happens first of all in our heads, or our thinking, or even in our actions. This is anthropological. And incarnational. This is in our bodies and beings. Being human in a *One God, One Spirit, One Christ, One Body* reality is about who we are. And about who we are becoming. It is a way of being powered by the Spirit. And the Spirit, the Spirit cannot be limited to what we know or understand, to what we think is right or wrong, to what we can do or not do, or to what we think is possible or not possible.

When we live—with our bodies and beings—into our identity as children of One God, then our work is to trust the Spirit, trust that Spirit is at work in the world. We don't have to understand how Spirit works, we don't have to know how the Spirit is going to bring new life out of disagreement and conflict. That isn't our work. That's God's work. Our work is to be faithful—faithful to our baptismal promises, faithful to our identity as God's beloved, faithful members of one new humanity, One Body. Being faithful means, in part, embracing the oneness of God and the oneness of our place in God's creation and God's kingdom. In the reality of One God and One Body, everybody and everything is precious and loved. In the kingdom of One God, there is an abundance of love and grace—there is more than enough for all bodies, all creatures, all creation. This is how Paul says it:

Those members of the body which seem to be powerless are necessary. And those members of the body which appear to be to be unworthy, on these we place greater honor; and our shameful parts have greater respectability, whereas our honorable parts have no need. But God fit together the body, having given greater value to that part which falls short, that there should be no divisions in the body, but that the members should have the same concern for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with; or if one member is glorified, all the members rejoice.

What Paul is describing is Jubilee. With different words and different images, his words echo Isaiah and Jesus: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because Spirit has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. Spirit has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Living as One Body is living into Jubilee. Our failure to live as One Body is because the scripts of our old humanity are so deeply written into our bodies and beings. With our fears and needs we hold each other captive, literally and metaphorically. Seeing others as rivals—rivals for love, rivals for forgiveness, rivals for security and safety, and on and on—the sin of our rivalry has created massive systems of poverty, violence, indebtedness, and oppression. The tempter is so good at what it does that we're blind and deaf to the lies.

But when, in the one baptism, we are raised to new life and into the new humanity of One God, the Spirit begins to write a new script onto us. This isn't easy or fun. This is the same Spirit that drove Jesus into the wilderness where the tempter engaged him for 40 days and 40 nights. In the wilderness, powered by the Spirit, we begin to see and hear the lies of our old humanity. And for the first time we know our poverty. And we see the ways that we have been separating ourselves from each other, complicit in keeping systems of oppression in place.

We have been through the waters of baptism, raised to new life by the One Spirit. And even as we now see the ugly truth of our sin, we are free to enter and live into the Jubilee of God's kingdom. We have been released from our sin, our debts forgiven. In Jubilee, all our bindings are released. In Jubilee, everybody belongs. Everybody has a place. All creatures and all creation have enough. As we relax into the abundance of One God, we experience the release and liberation from our bindings—whatever those bindings are. And in the

power of One Spirit, we are now free to release others from the ways we have bound them with our fears and needs and expectations. And we experience the reality of living with each other as One Body.

May we live into the joy and fullness of Jubilee.

May we trust the power of the Spirit, watching for the new life that is being raised up.

And may we, each day, live into our one baptism, renouncing the sin and scripts of our old humanity as we give ourselves to the transformation of the Spirit, the One Spirit of One God who is transforming us into the One Body of One Christ.