

“A Sense of Urgency”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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First Scripture Lesson: Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Second Scripture Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

¹²For 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. ¹³For 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. ¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If 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. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as He chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The 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.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and 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; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of It. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.



Sermon: *A Sense of Urgency*

Today we begin a new Stewardship season. I can tell that for some of you, this is not a welcome development. You may grow weary of the letters and bulletin inserts and minutes for stewardship and people asking “Hey, have you turned in your pledge card yet? All the cool kids are doing it ...”. But this is important. Supporting the church of Jesus Christ in general, and this little corner of it in particular, is important. But it occurred to me that I always just assume that everyone agrees with me and that may not necessarily be the case.

It's like in the movie *Animal House*¹ when Bluto gives his impassioned speech, you know the one: "Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?" and then he shouts "Who's with me?!? And goes running out of the house to take on the hated Omegas... and literally nobody follows him." I don't want that to be me. So, if I expect you to follow me, I guess I'd better tell you why I think you should. And I'll begin with Paul's letter to the Corinthians.

Paul had heard that the folks in Corinth were bickering about who among them was most important; which is interesting because the disciples did the same thing. Different people, different place; same desire: to be "first." Some folks who saw themselves as stronger believers or as spiritually more gifted than others were looking down their noses at their brothers and sisters in Christ.

There was a hierarchy developing and Paul didn't like it one bit. So, he tried to help them understand that none of them was more *or less* important than the others by comparing the church to a living human body. Remove some of the parts, especially the ones that are small and seemingly unimportant, and the body doesn't function as well. It's a remarkable description, really. Little things that don't seem so important are actually vital. Everything has a purpose and without everything, the body doesn't work as well as it is supposed to. "So, stop arguing about who is better," Paul says. "You all need each other, and God needs you all to work together."

And that is what we remember: everybody has gifts and skills, so everybody is important in the life of the church. Because your part is important, I can't exclude you. And because your part is important, you can't sit on the sidelines excluding yourself, either. *You* have to get involved and *We* have to help you. That's a great stewardship message.

Now we could stop there. And if we did, we'd have a really nice sermon, (plus we'd get out of church early and beat the Methodists to lunch). But we would also miss a larger point that Paul is making here. As individuals we are like parts of a body, we have to do our jobs and we have to work together. But the church, all of us together, *is* Christ's Body. And that's not just poetic imagery. It speaks to the gravity of what we are being asked to do as the church.

A 19th century poem widely but falsely attributed to St. Teresa of Avila* captures beautifully what I mean by this:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.²*

The church isn't just a safe place for folks to belong, although it *is* that. And the church isn't just a place where people go to worship God, although it *is* that, too. The church is the people of God gathered

* This work is principally by two authors: Methodist minister Mark Guy Pearse (1842-1930), and Quaker medical missionary Sarah Elizabeth Rowntree (dates unknown).

together for the purposes of implementing God's plan for creation. We are the tools God is using to build the kingdom.

Shirley Guthrie said it this way in his book *Christian Doctrine*,

*"The church is the community of people who are called out of the world to be God's people. The purpose of their coming together is twofold. First it is to receive God's judging, forgiving, renewing grace. Second, it is to be sent out again to be agents of God's judgment, forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal in the world."*³

Did you hear that? We *receive* God's grace. But we are also *agents* of God's grace. To be God's agents in the world, responsible for continuing the work Christ began. That's an incredible responsibility. But that's why we're here.

It can be easy to forget that; to lose track of just how important the church is. For generations now, we've been selling the idea that being a Christian is easy; that being a part of the church isn't really that big of a commitment. That it's a place we go once a week as opposed to a way of living; something we experience rather than something we do, every day. We've been emphasizing the comforting aspects of being a Christian: that we are loved unconditionally, that our eternity is taken care of, that God is more powerful than the things we fear most in the world. But being a Christian is also work.

So, we have to stop selling how easy this is; how it's just another thing to join. We are not called to build membership rolls, we're called to build disciples. Fact is, in some ways the church is very similar to other institutions of which you may be a part, but in other ways, it is very different. We get together for potlucks and Fourth of July cookouts and block parties, yes, but we are not a social club. We give generously to charity and provide meals for the poor and support immigrants and refugees, but we are not a service organization. We teach and study and debate and learn, but we are not a school or an institution of higher learning.

What we are, is the body of Christ, created by God and called to go into the world to make disciples of all nations, to love and serve God by loving and serving God's people; to bear witness to God's salvation in grace, mercy, and steadfast love. That's who we are. And I know that's a lot. I mean, I'm intimidated by that and if you're not at least a little bit intimidated by it too, then you're not paying attention.

*Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

Admittedly, that high opinion of the church has diminished in the world somewhat. The institutional church does as much to hurt that image in the world as help it sometimes.

And we don't like to think of ourselves as more important than we are. We might even be embarrassed to talk about our being a part of the church with our friends or co-workers. But this being a part of the body of Christ might be the most vitally important thing we ever do.

Let's think about it this way: how many of you watched the Ohio State football game yesterday? If you cared about who won, if you were nervous at any point, even just a little, if you got frustrated when one of your players made a mistake, if you thought at all of the young men on the field as "your players" or as "us," ask yourself "Why?"

The answer is that for many people, college football is vitally important. At Ohio State University, it *absolutely* is. OSU wins a lot of football games. But it's not vitally important because they win. They win

because it's vitally important. Fans, administration, students, alums, all put an emphasis on winning football games and on doing everything within their power to ensure that they *keep* winning football games: recruiting top-flight players, upgrading the stadium, soliciting big money donors, and hiring good coaches.

Urban Meyer is 79-8 in his time as head coach here. But, as good a coach as he is, he is not winning because he is at Ohio State. He is at Ohio State because he wins. If he ever stops winning college football games, you can bet your house that he will be sent packing and the administration will find someone else who will. But that's how you approach something that is vitally important.

Now the question of whether football really *is* vitally important or not is another matter for another time. (Spoiler Alert: It's not.)

But maybe football isn't the right comparison. Let's try something more charitable, like Habitat for Humanity. Habitat started in 1976 as a small local project to build affordable housing in San Antonio, Texas.⁴ In the last 42 years, it has grown into a huge, international organization that "has helped more than 4 million people construct, rehabilitate or preserve more than 800,000 homes... making Habitat the largest not-for-profit builder in the world."⁵ Habitat grows and thrives because people see it as vitally important.

Or how about the American Red Cross? The American Red Cross was founded by Nurse Clara Barton in 1861. It has grown to an organization of almost 200,000 volunteers and employees who "annually mobilize relief to people affected by more than 67,000 disasters [and] train almost 4 million people in necessary medical skills... ARC is [also] the largest supplier of blood and blood products in the United States, supplying 2,600 hospitals (approximately 39% of the US blood supply).⁶ How does a charitable organization accomplish so much? Because it is seen as vital and important.

Is the Church vital and important? I believe it is, and here is why.

Because we live in a world that is based on survival of the fittest; that whatever I have to do or want to do can be justified by the notion of self-preservation; where simply put, the ends justify the means.

We live in a world where money and power and beauty are worshipped like gods. Where the strong are praised and the weak or dismissed; where all too often it seems like, to paraphrase George Orwell, everyone is created equal, but some are more equal than others.

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly divided because of politics and religion and social issues and economics and nationality.

But in the midst of all our problems, the church has a healing story to tell.

Jesus says that we hold a common bond as Children of God. And that how and why we do things matters; that being successful and wealthy and powerful are not the ultimate goals of life. And that being those things, while not necessarily evil in and of themselves, are evil when they are achieved by hurting others and by cheating and by placing love of money and power and wealth before love of God and neighbor.

That the world is what God intended it to be when we love God and love our neighbors and our enemies; when we forgive one another and work toward reconciliation with those we have hurt and with those who have hurt us. The Kingdom of God draws closer when we work for peace and strive to ensure that everyone knows abundant life; when we love and serve God by loving and serving God's children.

And each day is better when we recognize that we are loved by God and that when we fail, when we stumble, when we sin, we are afforded a second chance, and God's love for us is not diminished.

And there is comfort in the good news of the Gospel, that the things we fear most in the world, even death, pale in comparison to the grace, mercy and steadfast love of God.

That's all incredible good news. It's difference-making good news. And it's the story the church was put here to tell. Where is the world going to hear that story and where are they going to see it in action ... if not in us?

But it's not enough to recognize that what we are doing is important, we have to have a sense of urgency about it. Business people and football coaches are fond of talking about having "a sense of urgency." It doesn't mean flying into a panic or trying to do something as quickly as possible. It means recognizing that what we are doing is important and getting after it; a sense of urgency is the opposite of taking a laid-back, we'll-do-it-tomorrow approach. We need to have a sense of urgency about our participation in the body of Christ.

Being a part of the church is the most vital and important thing you and I will ever do. We have been given a mandate from God. How dare we take that lightly.

*Christ has no body now but ours,
No hands, no feet on earth but ours,
Ours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but ours.*

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come, Amen.

End Notes

¹ Landis, John, director. *National Lampoon's Animal House*. Performance by John Belushi, et al., Universal Pictures, 1980.

² "Whose Hands? Another Possible Case of Cumulative Authorship." *Mockingbird's Imitations (Blogger Edition)*, 7 Nov. 2011, mimuspolyglottos.blogspot.com/2011/11/whose-hands-another-possible-case-of.html.

³ Guthrie, Shirley. *Christian Doctrine*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, pp 351-2

⁴ "Millard Fuller: Habitat for Humanity." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 3 Sept. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millard_Fuller#Habitat_for_Humanity.

⁵ "Habitat for Humanity." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Sept. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitat_for_Humanity.

⁶ "American Red Cross." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 24 Sept. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Red_Cross.