

State of the Church  
January 24, 2016  
Epiphany +3  
Luke 4:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Paul and I Corinthians 12

Tuesday night of last week we hosted the Atlas Foundation's annual Abrahamic Traditions Dinner, and I was invited to share a brief overview of Christianity's practice of "inclusivity." Rabbi Gabe Greenberg of Beth Israel and Emrah Aktepe also explored the same theme within their experiences of Judaism and Islam, respectively. During my introductory remarks, I noted that much of Christian tradition is various groups asking the question "What is Truth?" and then setting out to define and protect their answer.

Across the New Testament, in general, and within the the Pauline epistles, in particular, we encounter snapshots of how groups have defined Truth and then set out to protect it. In the case of the letters we study, we hear one side of a response to questions asked or missteps taken, as Paul or one of his students sets out to right a course gone wrong.

One common misstep groups seem to make, both in ancient times and today, is viewing their understanding of Truth as fixed (never changing, never evolving) and something vulnerable to protect (easily destroyed, easily attacked). A second misstep is organizing a new, fresh religious community with the same, old power and privilege categories of the world outside of their community. That is to say: they encounter a new thing—a new awareness of who God is, an "ah-ha" moment spotlighting how God has shaped them for the world and called them to live with one another. Then they begin to order their lives around this new awareness but quickly add an old structure of authority, rules, and boundaries just like the old thing they've known their whole lives. That is where Paul steps in today in I Corinthians 12.

Last week we heard the first part of this chapter in which Paul explains to the church that they have all been given different gifts for the good of the world, but the Source of each gift is the same God, same Spirit, same call to the Way of Jesus. There is obviously competition and misunderstanding within the church about differentness, and Paul is writing to remind them that the way they view their differentness is the thing that sets them apart from the world around them.

Today we read the second half of chapter 12 and hear Paul's famous image of the church as one body of many parts. Foot, hand, ear, eye, each is necessary to the functioning of the whole. Much of what is significant about this teaching is not simply

the words as they appear in our Bibles all these years later but the words held up against similar metaphors during the time Paul was writing.

Professor of New Testament Brian Peterson explains, “The image of the body as a communal reality is not unique to Paul (though Paul is the only writer in the New Testament to use it). Other writers in the Roman world (especially politicians and philosophers) used the same image. Most often, it was used to support the social hierarchy (whether of the family, or the city, or the empire as a whole). The point was that every body needs a head, and in society that was provided by the wealthy, the rulers, and the elite. Every body needs hands and feet to do the hard and dirty work, and that was provided in society by just about everyone else. Paul, while drawing on the same image, turns the point in a very different direction. The unity of the body does not, in fact, mean that the less honored members get abused and treated roughly; rather, all the parts belong to one another, and therefore the “weak” parts are treated with special care. The end result of the body metaphor in Paul’s hands is not the same old hierarchy, or even the inverse of that culturally-expected pattern of domination with new people placed on the top, but a deep unity of the whole body, with each part cared for by the others.”<sup>1</sup>

Something new is happening on the quest for Truth. This is not just about a bigger understanding of who God is and how God works and moves. This is also about a bigger understanding of who we are in relation to one another AND in relation to God. Our very communities will be shaped differently than the way the world around us shapes communities, and we must be awake and aware of our calling, if there is any hope of us getting it right.

### Our Lives

This morning we consider the State of the Church—where is St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church in its quest for Truth in January 2016? I invite you to also consider the state of your own life. What fresh understanding of who God is and how God moves into the world have you caught onto in recently days and weeks and months? How is your life being shaped by your understanding of Truth? What will the year before you hold? Will you move through it by inertia or with intention?

I Corinthians 12 presumes people know how they have been gifted and shaped for ministry in the church and service in the world. Gifts of teaching, understanding, healing, discernment, prophecy. And all of these gifts are not just to be used for the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2733](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2733)

personal edification of each individual who possesses them but for the common good of all.

Be fully you. Be fully you here in this congregation. Be fully you for the good of the world. There is an old cultural assumption that Christianity is really about stripping all of your personality and interests away to mold individuals into an unthinking, monolithic herd. It's unkind and untrue but not altogether unwarranted as many churches in America, particularly in the late 20th century, worked feverishly to protect Truth as they understood it. Diversity, questions, variety were sometimes perceived as threats against a narrative that needed protection.

But I have long had the sense that God's movement in this world and vision for us all doesn't need to be fiercely protected as much as it needs to be tenderly held. That is why I have quoted Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation for all of my adult life as I know it applies to each of us as individuals and most certainly to the Church as a whole: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." The Church at her best is to be filled with a disparate bunch of folks who, by the grace of God and the presence of the Spirit and the call to the Way of Jesus, are fully being themselves for the good of the Church and the good of the world.

### State of the Church

With these images before us—a faith community with some shared understanding of Truth, individuals shaped uniquely and differently for life, ministry, and service, and a people called to share themselves and their gifts for the common good, let us look back over the past twelve months.

St. Charles in 2015 saw growth in numbers—numbers of members, numbers of friends regularly attending worship and events, numbers of members in the congregation investing time and giftedness into this community, number of intentional partnerships within this building and within the neighborhood, and financial numbers matching income and expenditures for a balanced budget with small surplus for the first time in many years.

It seems to me that 2015 was the year of serious discussion and big events. We reintroduced ourselves to each other and to the neighborhood as a thinker's place, a music lover's place, a place of partnership and collaboration, a place of welcoming, a place of life. In January of last year, a couple dozen of us drove to Birmingham to mark the half-way point of our partnership with Baptist Church of the Covenant. This was a weekend of shared learning and friendship. It was also the beginning of observances

marking the 50th anniversary of marches in Selma. Throughout that month some of you went to the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, drove to walk the Edmund Pettus bridge in Selma, and many of us watched the award winning film *Selma* together as part of ongoing conversations about race, Southern life experiences, and then vs. now.

Conversation was big in 2015. Early in the year we helped form two sites for the interfaith dialogue program *Communities in Conversation*, and Darrell and Kathy Smith hosted the Loyola site as many of you participated in a look at Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

We celebrated the 21st anniversary of our Jazz Worship Service and moved into a five-week series on prayer practices as part of our Lenten observances. There were individual, small group, church-wide, and national denominational meetings. We met together in homes and coffee shops as we read Rachel Held Evans' *Searching for Sunday* together and considered the stories of faith that shaped us—for better and for worse—and how we understand the interplay of faith and life today. We also spent part of 2015 in conversation around marriage equality, how our church welcomes gay and lesbian members, and how we make space for all people here. These conversations are not always easy—race relations in the southern United States, religious upbringing and personal faith practices, welcoming and blessing all people within our faith community, the similarities and differences of major world religions.

This congregation is not afraid of difficult conversations. And we explored this year what it means to be a church who aspires to serve God by asking questions, seeking justice, loving neighbors, and welcoming all. In our differences, we found unity.

We made plans, spent time in conversation, and the Summer began the whirlwind of celebrations and hosting guests. Each month in summer we hosted a large dinner gathering, thanks largely to Ann Yarborough and her dedicated Hospitality Committee, with a different theme and activity each month—Mission Action led us in a night of considering hunger and food insecurity, Clay and Sarah Cotton guided us art projects, and Michael Howard led a lively—even raucous—night of singing old hymns. In July, Raymond and Ezekiel Poliquit-Moore introduced *Tuesdays in July* to the church and to the city with bluegrass, opera, classical, and jazz.

We found community around the church kitchen, painting and tidying up the building, arranging tables for 30 and 50 and 100 and 300. The busier our calendar got, the more it seemed we laughed and grew together as we prepared to host the city's CROP Hunger Walk, guest speaker and preacher Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee

for Religious Liberty and writer and blogger Rachel Held Evans, our first Mabel Palmer lecturer.

Our Community Partners continued to grow in number and in organizational impact. We welcomed Girls on the Run, The Learning Lab, Positive Family Solutions, the Center for Equal Justice, Riversong Counseling on Wednesday nights as we learned about how our Partners throughout this building are using their gifts, talents, and calling for the common good across New Orleans. Under the leadership of Associate Pastor Tim Moon, we took the first steps in partnership with the Audubon Charter School and created the Food For Thought program. In partnership with Audubon, we identified a family of five in absolute financial crisis and provided weekly and holiday meals as well as Christmas gifts. The partnership with Audubon has great potential for growth in 2016, and you have made certain Food for Thought is fully funded into the next academic year. As we consider the first small step of collaboration with Audubon, I am reminded of Oscar Romero's words, "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest."

The newest Community Partner has made the largest and loudest impact among us, the New Orleans Volunteer Orchestra. We adore Joseph Cieslak who came to us as an undergrad at Loyola and who now serves and worship alongside us as a teacher, a community leader, and a full member of this congregation. NOVO filled every corner of this sanctuary twice in their first four months here with music ranging from Faure's *Requiem* to Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* to Vince Guaraldi's *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Representing the very best of what we hope these Community Partnerships can be, NOVO musicians and singers have become a part of this fellowship, and friends from this congregation have joined as musicians and singers with NOVO and its choir. We have delighted in each other and celebrated the good in one another. It has been wonderful.

### Charge to the Congregation

Where 2015 was a year of hosting large gatherings, my prayer is that 2016 is a year of hosting small ones. Who have you seen across the room for months, maybe years, and never gotten to know. Go to coffee or lunch, make dinner reservations, invite a small group over to your house, start a supper club night. Let's pick up that thread of good, thoughtful conversation and add to it a layer of personal relationship.

Throughout 2015, let's hold before us Oscar Romero's words "We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this," alongside Frederick

Buechner's words, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Who has God shaped you to be? How do the Church and the world most need you to be your truest, fullest self? What is the something you can do, and do very well, this year?

At St. Charles we have studied Robert Schnase's *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* in which he defines the necessary practices of Christian faith communities as passionate worship, extravagant generosity, risk-taking mission and service, radical hospitality, intentional faith development. As we move into 2016, let us remember the words of Romero and Buechner alongside the words of Paul as he describes the various giftings of God's Spirit and the various parts of the body of the Church. Our task here is not all worship, and it is not all mission and service. Our call as a congregation is not just to hospitality or singularly to generosity. We are called to be a balanced, whole community of faith who uses its many parts for the common good.

Just as our individual lives are not healthy if they are all work, all play, all self-focused, or all others-focused, the a fruitful congregation is aware of balance, calling, and the limitations of time to do the "something" it is called to do and to do it well.

My prayers for this church in 2016 are for a slower, thoughtful pace that leaves room for spontaneous gatherings, community focus, unstructured time, and a rootedness of place. I pray we will fully see each other, welcome one another, honor each other's time and abilities, and delight in our sameness as well as our differences. May we pray for each other with intention, individually and as a group. May we know each other more fully, our quirks as well as our best impressions. What stories will we have to tell a year from now? What difference will our lives make when we share them for the common good? What might happen when we give ourselves to each other and to God for small acts of transformation?

We have been given a wonderful gift with a late New Year's start and early Carnival season. Truly, it will be almost mid-February before most of us face this year with routine and consistency. Be grateful for slow. Be grateful for the rest and play built into the rhythm of our city. Use these weeks to delight in each other's company. Take advantage of the slow to ask "Who am I shaped to be? How will God use me this year? What will this new year bring?"

And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

