

1.23.2022, Epiphany 3

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21

“Members of One Body”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Today we not only gather as the body of Christ in worship, we will also gather at our Annual Meeting as the body of Christ, St. Mark’s Lutheran Church in mission to the world. We are members of the one body of Christ, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

The church is always a both/and reality. The church is *both* the local congregation *and* the wider catholic universal church. We cannot be only the local church without also belonging to the universal holy catholic church. As Bishop Timothy Smith wrote in a Synod pamphlet, “We couldn’t be ‘us’ without your being ‘you.’ Thank you for this ministry we share and your vital part in it!” The local congregation is also part of the universal body of Christ.

This is who we are as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We are local congregations, and together, we are the body of Christ expressed in the synod and together in the ELCA. Paul addresses this in today’s reading from 1 Corinthians, writing, “*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*” This, of course, means that we are not simply an independent church. Again, Paul writes, “*Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?*”

We cannot say that because we are St. Mark’s, or any other church in this synod, that we are not a part of the body. The one holy catholic and apostolic church begins and finds its unity in Jesus Christ. For example, this is why we, along with churches throughout this synod and all synods, send Synod Benevolence each year to the ELCA. As a congregation we could not exist without the body of Christ as expressed in the ELCA.

Recently someone asked me why we send benevolence each year to the ELCA. Apart from the fact that our By-Laws as a congregation require us to give to the synod and the wider church, synod benevolence is really simply a gift to ourselves. Our offering to the ELCA is given as our “first fruits offering” to the body of Christ. The synod and national church budgets come from congregations like ourselves. The current suggested benevolence gift is 10% of our budget.

In an open letter to congregations last fall, Bishop Smith wrote, “It’s our responsibility to ask you and to lift up the opportunity to share. I’m asking you to share with your congregation and your congregation to support financially the ministries for which we are stronger together than we are

apart; namely, the synod and the ELCA.”

We all benefit from the body of Christ that is the ELCA. As your pastor, for example, I was baptized and confirmed in congregations and educated in the colleges and seminaries of the ELCA. I was nurtured in this church and grew in faith through the witness of members of this church who shared their faith with me when I was a young person. I speak personally as your pastor, because I have benefited from the breadth and depth of the body of Christ. Every time I preach, I am aware of the plaque behind the pulpit, quoting John 12:21, “*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*” It is my role as the pastor to describe Jesus, and how is alive in his body, the church, and in the world.

In my journey to St. Mark’s and this pulpit, I have been blessed to not only have been a “PK,” a pastor’s kid, and met and learned from many gifted people as a young person, but I have also worked in Christ’s body both in the U.S. and as a missionary in Japan. I have traveled to many congregations and synods in the U.S. who sponsored us as missionaries, who sent their benevolence on our behalf to sponsor global mission - congregations in Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, Ohio, Texas, North Carolina and South Carolina. I taught in a Lutheran College and Seminary in Tokyo Japan that was established in 1909 because of benevolence gifts made by American Lutheran churches. I have preached and taught in churches all over Japan that were founded by missionaries sent from this church. I have seen how the benevolence gifts we send reach across the world to people we will never meet, but who have met and seen Jesus through the work of his body. What I am laboring to share, through my experience, is that the body of Christ is real. St. Mark’s is part of the salvation story of Jesus and his body the church in this world. Our gifts are crucial to Christ’s mission.

We support the synod and the ELCA with our gifts because this is how the church grows. We grow by sharing our gifts with the church, sharing our stories and ideas, while trusting that the Holy Spirit is alive in the whole church, helping others see and know Jesus. St. Mark’s would not exist if it were not for the body of Christ. St. Mark’s was organized as a congregation on January 31, 1859. Since then, the name of the national church body has changed, but Jesus and his mission have not. In 1859 the church was called the United Synod of the South, in 1918 it was the United Lutheran Church in America, in 1962 it was the Lutheran Church in America, and since 1988 we have been the ELCA. Next Sunday, St. Mark’s will commemorate the 163<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of our founding as a congregation in the body of Christ. Of course, 163 years means that there have been many chapters in our church’s life, and St. Mark’s has responded in every chapter to the needs of society and the world. Our mission as a church has not changed. Our mission is to express the love and compassion of Jesus Christ to the world.

At today’s Annual Meeting, we will vote on our “2022 Mission Plan.” St. Mark’s mission plan is, of course, expressed through a budget that describes how we would like to use our tithes, offerings, endowment and all our financial resources in Christ’s mission toward the world. That plaque behind

the pulpit says, “*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*” That is what mission is; it is incarnating and embodying Jesus so Jesus Christ can be seen in the world.

In the gospel of Luke today, Jesus stood up, as I am standing before you, and proclaimed his “Mission Plan” for all the world. Jesus said, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He 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.*”

Jesus was quoting the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2a), proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor. Jesus declared his mission plan as a year of God’s abiding grace. Jesus said, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” Today Jesus is again telling us his plan for mission each and every year. Every year, we are to declare another year of the Lord’s favor, another year of God’s grace and love for all people. *Jesus’ mission plan is our mission plan.* Our mission, as a member of his body, is to enable others to see Jesus.

As members of Christ’s body, we have no other mission plan than this. Notice that Jesus did not come with a budget. He did not present a spreadsheet of figures. He simply said, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” Jesus is declaring that in him, his mission will always become reality. Jesus is trusting to us to put his mission plan into effect again this year as “*good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed.*”

St. Mark’s has been blessed with many resources for mission, and today we remember whose mission plan it is that we have been entrusted with and will vote on. We are members of one body, the body of Christ. We share the gifts of ourselves, our time, and our financial resources to ensure that Jesus is seen in the world by those Jesus wants us see and help. Jesus gives us a mission plan and it is our responsibility to envision *how* we will make the best use of our resources for Christ’s mission.

As St. Mark’s, we are entering our 163<sup>rd</sup> year of Christ’s mission in Charlotte. What got St. Mark’s here won’t get us over there into the future. St. Mark’s has shifted its focus over and over from 1859 to 2021. Successful and faithful people know that we must always allow Christ to reinvent us so that we can re-envision the future of mission with Christ for others. Churches grow when they allow Jesus to shift their focus from themselves to others over and over again. The mission of Jesus is always outward toward others. This is the mission plan of Christ Jesus that we are called to re-envision in order that might grow and thrive as a member of Christ’s body.

We are members of one body, Christ’s church. Allow him to work his mission plan among us. May this year also be a year of the Lord’s favor. Amen.