

# Tending Christ's Body

BY AMY EVERETT

**When we receive the grace of fellowship with Christ, the spirit of Christ calls us to tend to and feed one another. How we tend to each other (or not) as members of the same body, the Body of Christ, is personal to Jesus Christ.**

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**T**he body of Christ has many members, and the disciple Peter is certainly one of the more action-oriented ones. We see this in the third and final post-resurrection story in John 21:1-19. After the disciples have fished all night with no yield, a stranger on the beach encourages them to cast their net again. To the disciples' surprise, "they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish" (v. 6). John recognizes the stranger on the shore as the risen Jesus and exclaims to Peter and the others, "It is the Lord!" (v. 7) Hearing this good news, Peter jumps into the sea and swims to Jesus while the other disciples bring in the boat and the net loaded with fish.

After the disciples and Jesus share breakfast, Jesus asks Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Peter, with increasing angst over Jesus' repeated questions, answers, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." Each time Peter answers in the affirmative, Jesus follows with the command, "Then feed/tend my sheep" (vv. 15-17). Peter had denied Jesus three times before Jesus was crucified. In these exchanges, Jesus restores Peter's fellowship with him. Jesus teaches Peter that if he loves him, then Peter will take care of the brothers and sisters with whom he shares this fellowship.

Peter's professed love of Christ was bound to his love for Christ's people. Our fellowship with Christ is bound to our care for one another. We are mutually interdependent members of the Body of Christ. As the Apostle Paul explains, "If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26).



Paul's conversion story in Acts 9:1-19 reveals a great deal about our mutual interdependence as the Body of Christ; his first lesson of Christian faith is the inter-abiding love between Christ and his disciples. When he was known as Saul, he had been "breathing threats and murder against disciples of the Lord" (v. 1) and proactively preparing to bring those disciples bound to Jerusalem. But on his way to Damascus a bright flash of light from the sky stops Saul in his tracks and a voice from heaven asks, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (v. 4) Trembling on the ground, Saul pleads, "Who are you, Lord?" and the voice answers, "I am Jesus, *whom you are persecuting*" (v. 5). Saul's persecutions of the Church were personal to Jesus.

Saul was not just conspiring against a band of misguided Jews, but against Jesus the Christ, now exalted in heaven, and yet present with and within his disciples. No wonder Paul could later say to the Athenians that we "live and move and have our being" in Christ (Acts 17:28), because he learns this truth in the unforgettable moment he hears the voice of Jesus speaking to him on the road to Damascus.

In one of his parables Jesus points toward this post-resurrection relationship that unites him with his disciples. He imagines the Son of Man, who "comes in his glory" to judge the nations, saying, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Christ is present in and among his gathered community of disciples, the Church, the body of Christ.

After Saul's encounter with the resurrected Jesus Christ, he cannot see for three days and must rely on the disciple Ananias to lay hands on him, restore his sight, and baptize him. Ananias knows and fears Saul's reputation, but, at the Lord's instruction, he helps Saul anyway. Ananias, a member of the Body of Christ, abides with Christ, hears his instruction, and obeys. He calls Saul "brother," affirming that against all odds that the Lord has bound them as members of a common family (Acts 9:10-17).



Our biological ties to family are so strong that they certainly shape who we are. We forget, however, that being a member of the body of Christ gives us new, ever-expanding familial loyalties. When my grandfather lowered my mother into the water at her baptism, he said, "I baptize you my little daughter and raise you my sister in Christ." We often say "blood runs thicker than water," but our baptismal waters reverse the flow, and we, like Paul and Ananias, become brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus touches on this truth when he asks, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" and pointing to his disciples, he says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my

brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:47-50). Jesus' claim is not exclusive to Mary and his brothers, but is radically inclusive of all who would repent and follow him.

In my Baptist tradition, a belief in the autonomy of the local church tempts us to narrow our Christian family to the members of our local congregation. However, the Christian household extends far beyond the bounds of our local communities and chosen denominations. Just a quick search for churches around my neighborhood reveals a rich diversity of denominations: Baptist, Free Will Baptist, Missionary Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Catholic, Non-Denominational, Pentecostal, and so on. In spite of the many differences among us and against all odds, our baptism in Christ binds us as members of one body. When we recite together "I believe in the holy, catholic church" from the Apostle's Creed at the church where I serve, we counteract this tendency to limit our embrace of those with whom we share fellowship in Christ.

With this catholic perspective in mind, our local communities are important workshops of faith where we learn, remember, and practice our dependence on Christ and interdependence on one another. Just as denominations have differences among them, people in our local communities have diverse personalities, opinions, virtues, vices, and needs, and Christ calls us to tend to each person with love.

To address divisions within Corinthian church, Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ. He explains,

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.... God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

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*1 Corinthians 12:23-25*

This teaching is consistent with Jesus' instruction that "the least among all of you is the greatest" (Luke 9:48). You will recall that Jesus says this to the disciples who are arguing over which of them is the greatest and most

worthy of praise. Jesus and Paul are not saying that we should pity the “least” among us, but that we should not consider ourselves to be more deserving of God’s love than anyone else. This will free us to tend to and care for each member of the body of Christ.

In Christian faith, difference and disagreement can be sources for celebration because they give the occasion to depend on Christ for unity and fellowship. As we consent and cooperate with his presence and action in our lives, we serve one another and advocate for each other’s interests above our own. Against all odds, when we submit in service and love to one another, we come to know the grace of fellowship beyond difference and dislike. Conversely, when we know the grace of fellowship in Christ, we see with the eyes of Christ and submit to and serve one another in humility. When we love Christ, we tend to one another. When we tend to one another, we love Christ.



In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus says: “This is my body,” “This is my blood,” “Do this in remembrance of me” before the Lord’s Supper (Luke 22:19-20, Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23-25). But in the Gospel of John, rather than those words of institution, Jesus instructs the disciples, “So, if I, your Teacher and Lord, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (13:14). When Jesus teaches his disciples to wash one another’s feet, just as when he instructs Peter to “feed/tend my sheep” and when he confronts Saul on the road to Damascus, Jesus is pointing to the same important truth: our fellowship with him is always bound to our fellowship with one another.

In receiving the grace of fellowship with Christ, the spirit of Christ calls us to tend to and feed each other one another. How we tend to or do not tend to each other as members of the same body, the body of Christ, is personal to Jesus Christ.

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