

11B 2021

All this talk about circumcision might seem strange to us.

When Paul wrote his letters, however, circumcision was an issue heavy with meaning.

People needed to know whether a man was circumcised or not before they could decide how to interact with him.

For centuries, the Jews had set themselves apart from the surrounding people through male circumcision.

Once Gentiles began to convert, there were many who insisted, “Oh no. You can’t be a follower of Rabbi Jesus unless you obey all of Jewish law and get circumcised!”

In community after community, Paul had to address these objections.

We are left with multiple letters from Paul belaboring a topic that, on its surface, has very little meaning for us.

We passed beyond it two millennia ago.

In fact, one college student told my friend, the chaplain, that Christ came to save us from circumcision.

And that young man later became a priest.

Though I initially took his claim as a joke appropriate to a youthful male, as I reflected, I realized that Christ did indeed save us from circumcision and from all other ways of setting ourselves apart.

Unlike the Jews of Christ's time, we Christians do not wish to distinguish ourselves from others, to create a mini-utopia among ourselves, but instead, we seek to be the leaven of the world, to help everyone to rise, to grow, to mature in their relationship with God.

The topic of circumcision is therefore not wasted on us, but serves as a warning that we should not get caught up in self-focus, in creating an isolated community.

We exist for the sake of the whole.

Our focus is building others up.

As Christians, our question is always, "Can I help this person to develop more awareness of God's love for her?"

All baptized people are, after all, ministers.

That is how Paul envisions the Christian community, not as a gathering of the saved, of people who have already achieved something and who now meet together to prove that to God (as if God does not already know the state of our hearts).

Instead, he sees community as a place where we build one another up—where I find in you what I lack, and you find in me what you lack, so that together, we may thrive.

We gather in worship to give thanks to God and to gain the strength to go out and be the leaven in the world, the ones who remind others of God's love for them.

Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus that, in Jesus, all “are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”

What a beautiful metaphor, to be built *together* as a dwelling place for God.

In other words, each one of us forms a part of God’s living temple.

We each come together with different talents, different gifts to form a place from which God can reach into the world.

We are the church.

We mow and set up for service and usher and read so that we can come here and be strengthened to go out and spread the love of God.

Spirituality is not a private affair between Jesus and me.

We Episcopalians do not find Jesus alone in the closet with a Bible, nor do we satisfy ourselves merely with experiencing God in the quiet of nature (by which people usually mean groomed parks. Nature is full of bears and alligators and boars and snakes and is not peaceful, but threatening.)

We form the temple of God in the gathering from which we can go out and do ministry.

That is our salvation.

It brings us to the fullness of our being, free of fear and self-doubt, thriving in community with others.

These days, we have a lot of work to do.

Community once meant face-to-face relations in which we actively help to build one another's barns.

People brought up in such a world had a head start in grasping the gospel.

Now, community simply refers to affinity groups—the people we know who agree with us or who have the same hobby.

What is missing is knowledge of the importance of giving.

As a society, we have become acquisitive.

We go to yoga to get something, go to the doctor to get something, go to Walmart to get something, and if we do not get it, we write a bad review.

When people then come to church and are told that it is a community based on giving, many people have no experience of that, no way of understanding what that might mean.

It is an unfamiliar concept.

They leave saying that they did not “get anything out of it.”

My question is always, “What did you put into it?”

These social changes, powerful as they are, do not altar our basic *need* for community, merely our *awareness* of that need.

People still long to be connected, but often go about it the wrong way.

They still feel safe and comforted *if* they are able to recognize the difference between a place that treats people as a means to an end and one that treats them as ends in themselves.

The church strives to be a place where, as Sr. Joan Chittister reminds us, people can fall down and get up, fall down and get up again.¹

People still feel blessed *if* they can get to the point of giving to others, that is, if they do not mistake giving merely as *helping others to acquire*.

Without an awareness of real community, however, they cannot understand that acquisition is not what we are about.

Deacon Jean, for example, teaches those who volunteer their time in the coat closet that they are not just helping people to acquire coats.

They are meeting people, getting to know them, ministering to them, helping them to know the love of God.

The coat is just an excuse.

Similarly, Susan Weber and second helpings is not just about food redistribution.

They are witnessing to God's love everywhere they go.

¹<https://www.ncronline.org/print/news/opinion/religious-life/column/where-i-stand/benedictine-options-escape-or-experience-essence>

Jesus saved us from being a people who set themselves apart and invited us to be the leaven of the whole, a people who spread the knowledge of the love of God.

We come to church not to separate ourselves, but to be strengthened for our work in the world.

Here, the ministry of the word and the ministry of the sacrament feed us.

Prayer and community build us up for our mission, which is always to ask,

“How do I help this person to know more deeply God’s love?”