

Epiphany 3
1-23-22
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THE BODY ELECTRIC

I have titled this sermon, "The Body Electric." It's a term borrowed from Walt Whitman's celebration of the human body in his poem, "I Sing the Body Electric," from the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Electricity was cutting-edge technology in Whitman's day, thanks to Ben Franklin's famous kite experiments a century earlier. Then in 1818 a Scottish researcher named Andrew Ure animated the corpse of a hanged murderer using electrified rods connected to a battery. The same year Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*. She was inspired by Lord Byron's famous challenge to a small group of friends that they each write a ghost story. As she later recalled, they had been discussing "whether the principle of life could be discovered and whether scientists could galvanize a corpse" — that is to say, bring a corpse back to life by electrifying it.

The group was aware of experiments similar to Ure's in which electricity was used to stimulate muscle contractions in animal carcasses and human cadavers. Mary Shelley never specified how the creature in her novel was "galvanized" — or indeed whether electrical apparatus was even involved. There was only a single reference to a "spark of being" that was somehow applied to a body assembled from charnel-house parts. As far-fetched as her Gothic horror tale now seems, the possibility of bringing such a creature to life was treated seriously by leading scientists of the day. In fact, we've all seen those medical dramas on TV, when a patient flatlines and is shocked back into life with electrified paddles.

Almost from its inception, the Christian church has used the human body as a metaphor for its own organization, with the Holy Spirit providing the "spark of being" that gives it life. Think of it as a body electric that has nothing to do with electricity. St. Paul wrote, "The whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love."

When working properly, the body of the church has behaved as advertised. But at other times — such as during the Crusades or the Inquisition — it has marauded across the landscape like the animated corpse in *Frankenstein*. Or during the Reformation, when the body in question threatened to dismember itself entirely. You can certainly say the church is a body that suffers the ills humanity is prey to.

But there are also specific problems with the way this body is joined and knit together. Jesus had tried to discourage his disciples from jockeying for position. "The leaders of the Gentiles lord it over them," he told them. "It shall not be so among you." He told them that "whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." Likewise St. Paul said, "God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part."

Yet as the Apostolic church spread rapidly throughout the Mediterranean world, its early communal structure was replaced by a hierarchical organization on the Roman administrative model. The elders of the church appropriated the title "bishop" from the Roman word for "overseer." Eventually bishops and priests (who did not exist in the apostolic church) became their own clerical order, set apart from the laity, or people.

Popes and prelates came to believe they were at the head of the church. But according to the original model, Christ himself was the head. If we seek those who deserve the greater honor, as St. Paul would have it, we must look elsewhere:

- To the old woman with cancer who still shows up each week to play the organ because there is no one else to lead the music.
- To the scruffy guy who would never darken the door of the church on Sunday mornings but religiously attends AA meetings at the church on Tuesday nights to make sure someone else stays sober.
- To the ladies who arrange the flowers on the altar and launder the vestments.
- To the woman who lost her only son years ago and now reaches out to the mother of a dying child.

All such as these, joined and knit together in ways that have nothing to do with ecclesiastical offices or denominations or creeds, are the true body of Christ.

When I was a kid growing up in the 1950s, we would be packed off to Sunday school halfway through the main service, which was usually Morning Prayer. There would be a children's recessional where everybody would belt out some shopworn hymn like "Onward, Christian Soldiers" or "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God."

The words to this latter hymn go like this, starting at the third verse:

They lived not only in ages past;
there are hundreds of thousands still;
the world is bright with the joyous saints
who love to do Jesus' will.
You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea,
in church, or in trains, or in shops, or at tea;
for the saints of God are just folk like me,
and I mean to be one too.

You don't hear that one sung much anymore, but it never fails to choke me up. Why, I don't know. I can't say that I ever had much ambition to be a saint — and in that I am sure I succeeded. But, of course, the hymn uses the term "saint" in its original sense. Not as somebody whose behavior is impeccable. Not like those depicted in medieval paintings with a halo around his or her head. "Saint" was the term used for everyday followers of Christ. The old woman with cancer who plays the organ in church each week. The scruffy guy in AA meetings who is there to make sure someone else stays sober. The ladies in the altar guild. The woman who lost her only child and now reaches out to other grieving mothers. All joined and knit together in the body of Christ, with the greater honor to the lesser part.

But what about now? How can we be joined and knit together when we can't even be in church together? The short answer is that this isn't the first time the body of Christ has been physically pulled apart. Start with the early Christians who were forced to hide like rats in the Roman catacombs. There were Christians in medieval Europe who suffered plagues far greater and more lethal than COVID. Our Anglican forebears in Puritan New England — indeed, right here in Middletown — couldn't meet in church because they were despised as Tories during the American Revolution.

We've been here before, folks. Sure, we'd all greatly love to be together under one roof: face to face, not mask to mask, passing the peace without social distancing, sharing the communion cup. One day soon we hope to be back together as one body in the flesh. But the body of Christ does not exist just in one particular time or place, or even just in this world rather than in the next.

Christ who is the head existed in the beginning, before all time. And his communion is a communion of saints, present and departed. A great cloud of witnesses, as it's described in the Book of Hebrews. In the meantime, we have one expedient not available to our ancestors hiding in the Roman catacombs or in the plague-infested cities of Europe. We have these marvelous electronic devices that enable us to connect with one another, no matter where we are. You might say that the body electric has now become the body electronic.

Amen.