

It Takes Us All

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31: For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and 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; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

“Is what he describing sound authentic to you?”

That was the first question Gordon Cosby asked David, a homeless man who was my host during my visit to Church of the Savior in Washington, DC. I had been tasked with starting a new church in a neighborhood about 2 miles west of downtown Birmingham and, as a 25 year old who had never pastored any church much less started one, I was trying to learn all I could from those who had done amazing and creative work and were willing to think outside the box as to what church could be. Church of the Savior was number one on my list of churches to visit.

It was started in 1948 by Gordon and Mary Cosby and quickly grew to around 100 members. But that’s when something truly radical happened. Gordon and Mary suggested something that must have sounded crazy – “we’re getting too big.”

Can you imagine, that? 100 people too big.

Gordon went on. "If we continue to grow like we are doing, we will inevitably turn our focus on how to maintain what we have and how to make what we have bigger. Our focus will be about growing the institution of the church rather than being the church for the community around us."

For Church of the Savior, their key question was never how can we grow our church. Rather, their key question was always how can we serve our community. Here's how it worked. They disbanded their 100 member congregation and instead started 10-20 person smaller communities of faith loosely connected to each other. Each community would meet together to worship, to pray, to grow spiritually and then rather than spending their time and energy seeking to maintain their institution, each of these small communities of faith went to work serving the larger community. They believed the work of the church was truly the work of every single person in the congregation – not just the pastor, not just the church staff. And they believed that God had given each person unique gifts that they could offer.

So for example, a couple of nurses decided they would start offering simple medical treatment to the poor in the surrounding community. Fast forward a decade and that simple ministry had turned into a free hospital for the homeless community. A police officer felt called to support people recently released from prison. Fast forward a few years and that turned into one of the most comprehensive prison re-entry programs in the city. And I could give you example after example of how the members of that church used their unique gifts to impact the city. From 1948 to the time I visited in 2006, the church had started over 60 non-profits that all began because a member of the church heard God's call to use their gifts to serve the community and the church rallied to support their vision in whatever way they could.

2022 has the potential to be a real gift for us as a congregation. I know that's a bit of a strange statement because the last few years have not felt like a gift at all. And 2022 certainly hasn't started off the way I wanted. Believe me, the last thing I wanted to do in starting off this year is suspend in person Sunday school, especially as kids had just started coming back. But in spite of all that, 2022 has the chance to be a real gift which is not the same as saying it will be an easy year. Let me explain what I mean.

At some point in this year, you all will be invited to participate in the process to lean into the question, "Who is God calling us to be?" In fact, we're going to even begin that conversation at the annual meeting in a couple of weeks. On some level, this question, "Who is God calling us to be?" has been put upon you by the UCC process of finding a new settled pastor after John left. But notice the first question that the UCC asks us to consider is not, "Who do we need our next pastor to be?" Rather, the first question is, "Who is God calling us to be?" The assumption behind that question is that the work of the Church truly is the work of all of us, and that means 2022 can be the year where we as individuals and as a collective imagine what would make us feel alive as a congregation. What would make this a community that was so uplifting and lifegiving for you and others? What do we need to do to make a real impact in the community around us?

Notice, what I didn't say. I didn't say this is the time for you to decide what church committee to be on for this year. Don't get me wrong. Those committees are important. I've asked some of you to be on committees and I know Frank has and we'll keep asking. Those committees help us do the ministry we are doing right now well. They are necessary. But the gift of 2022 is that we have a chance to not only consider what we need to do next week or next month, but we have the opportunity to consider what future God is calling us to step into.

And if we've learned anything from this pandemic, it's that church can look very different than anything we thought of before. We don't have to be bound by any limitations other than our own imaginations. And I think our imaginations can be set most free when we recognize that every single person in our community has a unique gift to offer that can help us be a better church.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he was concerned that the Church would start to consider some roles in the church as more important than others. Using the analogy of the human body, he pointed out that each part of our body performs an important function. We need eyes to see but the whole body should not be an eye. We need ears to hear, but the whole body should not be an ear. Each part of the body performs a vital task that helps the whole body. The same is true with church. We have people that have musical skills and talents that help lead us in worship. We have people with management and organizational skills that help us make sure we are being faithful stewards of our money and our building. We have people who are passionate about serving who make lunch bags every month for hungry people. We have people deeply committed to social justice who serve in some ways as our conscience. We have people who know how to make others feel welcome who seek out new people to include them. And I could go on and on.

But so far, I've only mentioned the things we are already doing. But I want to encourage us to think beyond that. Frederick Buechner once wrote, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Over the course of this year, I want to invite us all to be asking ourselves four questions:

"What are you most passionate about?"

"What are the deepest needs of the community around us?"

"How can you use your passionate to begin addressing that need?"

"How can we as a faith community support each other as we authentically seek to use our passions and gifts to respond to those needs around us?"

Again, notice what I didn't say. I didn't say, "What new committee do we need to start?" I didn't say, "What new official church ministries do we need to begin?" We may need to do those things, but that's not the first step. The first step is how can pay attention to God's call in

our lives? How can we tap into our passions and support one another as we lean into that which makes us feel alive and use those passions in a way that makes the world a better place?

My last day at the Church of the Savior was a Sunday and so I decided to go and worship at the community of faith where Gordon still preached – he was 89 at the time. I entered this small dining hall of the original Church of the Savior property and there was not a single person there within 40 years of my age. And if you didn't know anything about who this Church was, you would think this was such a sad image. Gordon Cosby, 89 years old, had given 60 years of his life to try to start a new church and all that was left was about 12 people all of whom were 70 years old or older. If you knew nothing about the history of that community, you would think that this was such a failure.

And if you thought that, you could not have been more wrong.

The truth is that because Church of the Savior had decided to focus on serving the community around them, thousands and thousands of people had been impacted. Because Church of the Savior believed that every person had a vital role to play and it was never about who the pastor or staff were, people who didn't even know Gordon Cosby's name had their entire lives transformed by that faith community. Because they didn't believe the measure of authentic ministry was how many people showed up on a Sunday morning, they didn't build a large church. Instead, they changed the world.

Friends, I'm not telling you this story to suggest we should do the exact same thing that Church of the Savior did and disband our church and start meeting only in small groups. That's what God called them to do. But what I am suggesting is that if we truly listen to what God might be saying to us right now, we too might be invited to lean into a vision of Church that gets us outside of these walls to work with others throughout Milton and the Greater Boston community to do amazing things.

I don't yet know what all the specifics of our process of visioning will be over this year will be. As I said, we'll start to figure that out together at our annual meeting. Whatever process this church chooses will be up to you – we're a congregational church after all. But as you begin this work, I want to encourage you to not limit your imaginations of what Church could be. Lean into your deep passions and pay attention to the world's deep need. And maybe we should all ask ourselves the question that Gordon asked David about me, "Is the vision authentic?"

Is it authentic to who God has called us to be?

For that to be true, one thing I'm certain of and that is it will take all of us.