

November 19, 2017
Whose job is it anyway?
Ephesians 4:11-16

Here are some of the things the Bible teaches us about the church:

- The church is people who love Jesus.
- The church is the family of God.
- The church is the community of the Spirit.

This morning we're getting practical. Who are the people within the church? We know we have pastors and such. Who are they? What do they do? What about the rest of us?

Paul likes to describe the church as a body, the body of Jesus, in our world. We are intimately connected one with another in His body, the church. This is a helpful way to think about who we are. *"Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others"*(Romans 12:4-5).

"Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink ... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."(1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

The thing about a body is that every part is important. There are arms, hearts, legs, fingers, lungs, knees, necks, livers that all have different functions. But all are important.

When you think of the church in those terms, we are all different, but all are important. *"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.*

"Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines"(1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

The most important part of the body is the head. Paul says, *"the head is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work"*(Ephesians 4:15-16).

What's interesting in this metaphor is that ALL parts are important. No part is more holy, more valuable, or more spiritual than another. EVERY part has a critical role to play. The

body, the church, does have pastors who do certain things, but they are no more important and no less important than any other part of the body/person in the church.

What about "priests"?

In some Christian traditions, churches have priests, who are often perceived to be different than other people. They are called apart, educated in religious things, and ordained as "priests" – they, and only they could do priestly things. This tradition draws a bit on the Old Testament tradition where one caste of people could perform certain "priestly functions": (1) from God to people, they share His love, grace, hope, and mercy, and (2) from people to God, they bring prayers, petitions, and intercessions. In these traditions, only priests can really read the Bible, teach the Bible, and administer God's grace, often through specific sacraments or rituals. And only they can really pray directly to God: we do best to bring our petitions to them, and they will get God's ear for us.

There are challenges with these kinds of priestly traditions. First, claiming special knowledge, abilities, and titles separates you apart and gives divine authority and power – a dangerous combination. The legacy of residential schools shows how this can be abused.

Second, while it appeals to an Old Testament model, the New Testament makes a radical claim: we are ALL priests. There is no priestly class anymore. The term we use to describe this is "the priesthood of ALL believers." In the New Testament, the only discussions of priests are in terms that include ALL of us, together. Peter writes, "*you are (ALL) a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9). There is no New Testament teaching about a separate, priestly class of people. In fact, as Troy preached on October 29, our baptism, by which we affirm our faith in Jesus, is also our initiation into being a priest in the Kingdom of God.

What does that mean?

1. ***from God to people***, we can ALL share His love, grace, hope, and mercy, and
2. ***from people to God***, we can ALL bring prayers, petitions, and intercessions.

All of us have the privilege and the responsibility to share God's love with other people, and to pray for other people. There is nothing only a "priest" can do, because we are all "priests"! So, in our church, although pastors typically do certain things – like preach, lead communion, lead funerals, perform weddings – there is no restriction on that. We can ALL do any of those things, because we are ALL priests (weddings do require a provincial license, that's a government thing, not a biblical thing).

What about "Pastors" and all those other titles?

We are ALL priests. In theory, we are all a body. Ideally, we all use our unique abilities, skills, talents, gifts, and resources to work together to help the church function.

The New Testament doesn't leave us in chaos. There are people who use specific gifts in leadership in churches. There are four terms used in the New Testament: pastors, bishops, elders, and deacons. Let's look at them a bit:

Pastors. The word "pastor" is simply a Latin translation of "shepherd." The people we call pastors are literally shepherds. What do shepherds do? They take care of sheep. They guide, protect, care for, and seek to what is best for their flock to thrive. That's what pastors do: we try to guide, protect, care for and do what is best so we all thrive.

Paul says, "*Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Pastors are people with gifts, just like anyone else. God has simply given pastors specific skillsets we are called to use, faithfully, in service, just as anyone else. We use our abilities right alongside the people who are washing dishes, replacing lightbulbs, serving at the Soup Kitchen, visiting the sick, coaching basketball, reading in schools, and so on. We are not "better" than others (shepherds were at the bottom of the social status ladder back in the 1st Century). We are not "more spiritual" than others (we are all called to holy lives).

In our tradition, then, we do not use terms like "priest" (we are ALL priests) or "Father" (which implies a separation and a status above other people). Historically, if Baptists used any special language at all, they would refer to ALL men as Brother Whatever and ALL women as Sister Whatever. In recent years, we have begun to use term like "Reverend"; this is relatively new. It's mostly practical: in a secular world it simply identifies you as a pastoral person. I certainly hold it pretty loosely and don't take myself too seriously. ☺

Bishops/overseers. Another word in the New Testament is "*episkopos*." Over 2000 years of history, that word has been corrupted to the English "*bishop*." In its original meaning, episkopos/bishop was just an ordinary word for an "*overseer*," "*manager*," or "*superintendent*." It didn't have any of the high-and-mighty power connotations that the word "bishop" does now. (Church history buffs will recognize that traditions that do have the whole priest-bishop structure are often called "episcopal" churches, e.g. Roman Catholic and Anglican/(or as it is known in the U.S.) Episcopal Church).

In the New Testament, an episkopos seemed to be just another word for "pastor" (see Acts 20:28). As an overseer/manger/superintendent, the episkopos was a "*shepherd of the church of God*" (Acts 20:28), with responsibility to build up, care for, and protect the flock. Historically it has come to mean more of a higher power, but this is not in the Bible.

Elders/presbyters. The third Greek word means "elder," "*presbuteros*." Elders are older, wiser, people in churches who are recognized for their gifts of godliness, wisdom, and experience to help the church grow. In most biblical texts, the terms "pastors," "episkopoi" (overseers/bishops), and "prebyteroi" (elders) are used interchangeably. They

all look after, care for, and build up churches. (Church history buffs will recognize that during the Reformation, some traditions rejected the episcopal system of the Roman Catholic Church, and empowered "elders" or "presbyters" in churches to counterbalance the influence of the priests/bishops (e.g. Reformed, Presbyterian)).

Deacons, from the Greek word for "servant," were people who helped provide food to widows (Acts 6:1-6) and served alongside overseers, pastors, and elders (1 Timothy 3:1-13). They were the people using their gifts, talents, and abilities so that the pastors/overseers/elders could preach, teach and do the things God had gifted them to do.

Most biblical scholars agree the early church was very pragmatic about leadership. They really didn't get in knots about titles and stuff. They certainly didn't create a big hierarchy with authority structures and power plays. No one had special authority, specific rituals only they could do, or absolute authority. They were very egalitarian and all about working things through, together, as a community. Together, as a community, they prayed things through, worked things through, decided things through, and moved forward.

Our church comes from a (Baptist) tradition drawing on these New Testament principles:

- ALL of us have gifts/talents/abilities/skills/experiences/resources we can use to build up God's Kingdom. We ALL have the awesome privilege and the solemn responsibility to use those in the church and in the world.
- We are ALL priests: we can all share God's love and pray for others.
- We ALL pray things through, work things through, decide things through together. In practice, we delegate much of this to our church council. This is why we have at least one (and sometimes several) congregational meetings each year, too.
- We ALL aspire to integrity and godly character, called to be the best we can be. There isn't one standard of holiness for pastors, one for everyone else.

What we ALL need to hear, again and again, is that we are ALL *"a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9). That's a tremendous privilege. And a tremendous responsibility. We are ALL Jesus' body in our world.

We are ALL in this together. We all have a role to play. We can be the parts of the body God created us to be. We simply use the gifts/talents/abilities/skills/experiences/resources God has given us to build His Kingdom. Some of us do that in the church. Some of us do it in the community. It doesn't matter where we serve; we simply do the best we can with what God has given us.

How can you be a priest? Sharing God's love? Being God's love?