

EPIPHANY: IN FAITH WE PROCLAIM GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE

Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 21, 2007

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

The Body of Christ

This week's epistle reading from 1 Corinthians challenges us with a lesson about how the members of Christ's body depend on one another. It claims our attention in a compelling way by providing a snapshot of Jesus' first followers as they struggled with a central problem of early Christian life and faith, a problem that also lies at the center of Christian life and faith in our postmodern world.

In biblical, theological terms the problem is this: how to die to self in order to abide in Christ and live for others. Or, more in keeping with our own practical, day-to-day living, the problem challenges us to love and respect all the members of Christ's body as much as we love and respect ourselves.

The Golden Age of Rome dominated the Mediterranean world when Paul wrote this letter to the Christians living in the city of Corinth. But don't take this Golden Age for a paradise. The 1st century A.D. Mediterranean world enjoyed little sense of unity. Roman armies and Roman law could only plaster a thin veneer of unity over the often contentious and brutal competition and sectarianism between cities, cultural groups, religions, and schools of philosophy and morality.

The church in Corinth did not escape this sectarianism. Its members troubled Paul for almost a decade with partisanship and snap judgments about one another. Paul wrote at least four letters to Corinth, two of which have survived. Our passage takes us right into the heart of church life in Corinth, where factions competed with one another over points of theology, money, leadership, prestige, and power.

The reading from 1 Corinthians reveals the scope of this church's dilemma: how to square their faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ with squabbles over who should hold power, who had the most prestige, and who had the best claim to follow Christ. Paul's medicine for healing this great gash in the side of the church includes a strong dose of common sense and practice morality.

He borrows insights from the moral philosophers of his time, building, for instance, an analogy between the human body and the body of Christ. The human body is comprised of many parts and depends equally on all its parts, no matter how lowly. The body of

Christ works like this, too. Paul writes, “And so there is no division in the body, but all its different parts have the same concern for one another. If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share its praise” (1 Corinthians 12:25-26, *GNT*).

In 2004, Hollywood actor Mel Gibson produced a powerful film entitled *The Passion of the Christ*. The film’s graphic, but unforgettable account of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ gives the story behind Paul’s story. You’ll better understand Paul’s conviction that the death of Jesus of Nazareth gave us all membership in Christ’s Resurrected Body. We respond appropriately to Christ’s supreme sacrifice by loving and respecting one another.

This week’s Reflection was prepared by Dr. Robert Hodgson, who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Dean of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

+ + +

This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: The Gambia – With thanks to God for new leadership in the Gambia Christian Council which is encouraging dialogue with non-Christian audiences, and with prayers that God will bless this venture, and with prayers for wisdom and guidance for new translators as they undergo training; **Senegal** – With thanks to God for the launch of the Bible in Serere, and with prayers that it will touch people’s hearts and minds and allow them to better know and serve the Lord, and with prayers for the Pular translation project and for work on translating the Bible into Mandjack; **Sahel Project** – With thanks to God for the growth of Bible work in the countries which make up the Sahel Project, and with prayers for political stability in Guinea-Bissau and Guinea and for the Christians in Mauritania.

Activity Corner: “Spreading God’s Message” Poster

Supplies needed: Bible; poster board or newsprint; markers; crayons (for younger children)

Read together Psalm 19. Across the top of the poster board or a sheet of newsprint, write the words, SPREADING GOD’S MESSAGE ALL OVER THE WORLD. Read together 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Down the side of the poster board or newsprint, write the words, HANDS, FEET, EYES, EARS, MOUTH. Invite members of your household to talk about what it means to be the “Body of Christ” in the world. In what ways can we use our hands, feet, eyes, ears, and mouth to spread God’s message? Write down everyone’s responses on the poster board or newsprint and encourage younger children to participate by drawing pictures. Display the poster throughout the week where you gather for family devotions. Incorporate everyone’s responses into a prayer. Conclude by singing together “I Love to Tell the Story” or “O Zion Haste, Your Mission High Fulfilling” or one of your favorite hymns.