

The role of this or any other congregation that claims to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior is to practice our faith.

You know the old saying, “Use it or lose it?” This is true for the Body of Christ too.

- Feet that never move become atrophied.
- Voice boxes that never speak up become weak.
- Arms that never carry become feeble.
- Minds that are not stretched become dull.

We do not get to choose which part of the body we are. Paul reminds us here that each of us serves at the pleasure of Almighty God. God arranges the members of the body. We might want to be the ears, but God decides we are going to be the voice.

And our part changes over time. At one point in our lives we might be the arms but later we are the spine. And how do we figure this out? How do we discern what part of the body we are?

Sometimes it’s because others have noticed that we have certain gifts for ministry. Other times, we realize that we feel especially close to God when we are engaged in a certain way.

The point is that 1) all of us are a part of this body and 2) it’s not just about being busy around here. It’s about intentionally practicing our faith and asking:

- How is my activity making the Body stronger?
- How are my actions in the Body changing things for good?

If you have no idea what part of the Body of Christ you are, or if you feel like the one of the weaker parts that cannot do much— have no fear. Connect with another part of this Body. Ask for insights or help.

If one member suffers, we all suffer together. But what we are working on – as a whole Body – is nothing short of perfection. We want this Body to be healthy. We want the Body to be whole. We want this Body to be what God created it to be, in the likeness of Christ.

If you are seeking meaning and purpose, this is it. This Body is forever.

Let us pray: O Lord, make us into your hands and feet. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Let me explain. If I asked each of you today: “**How do you practice your faith?**” I suspect that you might say something like this (in fact I fear that you will say something like this) :

I attend worship most Sundays.

I bake cookies for coffee hour because I like to bake.

I volunteer in the nursery because- honestly - I can't get out of it.

I'm an usher because somebody's got to do it.

I sing in the choir because they really need more choir members.

I won't ask for a show of hands about whether any of that resonates with you.

What I hope we would say is this:

- *I practice my faith by baking cookies for coffee hour because I want to help create a welcoming table for strangers and friends who gather together on Sunday mornings.*
- *I practice my faith by volunteering in the nursery so that parents can worship without distraction knowing their children are safe and loved.*
- *I practice my faith by serving as an usher because it prepares the sanctuary for calm, meaningful worship.*
- *I practice my faith by singing in the choir because I want worship to be beautiful, and I want even strangers to experience spiritual joy.⁵*

Practicing our faith is more interesting and more intentional than merely busying ourselves with it. And it can be more dangerous because it means we are taking our faith more seriously, as if our Christian faith could really change something.

I remember a character in a novel once saying, about the Christian faith:

What they want you to do, my dear, is sponsor religion, not practice it.

Don't let your conscience mix you up.

If you practiced the teachings of that man Jesus ...

we'd think you were crazy . . ."⁶

And maybe people would think we were crazy if we explained that we are actively a part of the Body of Christ – not because we don't have anything else to do – but because we believe it is our purpose in life.

⁵ This was first written in my blog on May 12, 2007. See <http://churchforstarvingartists.blogspot.com/search?q=practicing+our+faith>

⁶ *Strange Fruit* by Lillian Smith. First Harvest edition, page 46.

church rolls” – but we are members in terms of being a part of the whole Body of Christ. For the Body to be healthy, all the parts need to be working well together.

The role of the congregation is to be the living, breathing body of Christ. The role of any member is to be an active part of the body.

But mere activity doesn't make a healthy body. In fact, the wrong kind of activity can kill the body. And maybe even kill the soul.

Have you ever had the experience of being so involved in something – something good – that what started out as a gratifying, life-affirming way to spend your time turned into a soul-sapping, energy-snuffing burden?

I've seen it everywhere: in the PTA, in neighborhood associations, in Scouts or a sports team or any number of countless activities. Most of all: I've seen it happen in church. Here's the common scenario:

Person feels a spiritual tug, a longing to connect with Something Bigger than himself, something life-changing. And so he wanders into a church building, or she joins a congregation in hopes of growing spiritually, in hopes of doing something/being something that matters.

Immediately, he joins the choir or she becomes an usher. He signs up to help with three or four activities. She is recruited to help with several projects. And suddenly, it all becomes a burden instead of spiritual fuel.

Have you ever known a church that is so busy that people feel depleted instead of spiritually fulfilled?

A busy church is not necessarily a faithful church any more than a busy human body is necessarily a healthy human body. What matters is the intentionality behind the activity. What matters is the meaning of it all, the purpose of it all.

Diana Butler Bass, a writer and leader in the Episcopal tradition and one of our neighbors living here in Alexandria writes about the differences between a church – a Body of Christ – that does lots of programs and one that practices its faith. There is indeed a difference.

She differentiates between Practicing Christians (*people who intentionally live out Christian practices*) from Participating Christians (*people who participate in the various programs of the average congregation.*) My fear is that most of us **participate** in some small or great way in the church. But too few of us intentionally **practice** our faith.

*My gifts of healing are more important
than your gifts of speaking in tongues.⁴*

Or maybe you've heard it this way:
*I baked three cheesecakes for the last bake sale.
But so-and-so only spent 30 minutes pouring coffee.*

Or:
*I've been singing the choir for 50 years now and so-and-so has only been singing for 40
years and I can't believe she gets to sing a solo.*

Maybe you've heard that kind of thing in some churches.

But Paul was saying, "Wait a minute! We are all essential. We all belong. We need each other. In fact, if you think that one of the other members is a weak link, know that the "weaker" members are indispensable. And those so-called "inferior" members are actually the ones we should be honoring most.

We human beings have a habit of separating ourselves from each other. We often divide the world in terms of "us" and "them."

- Democrats versus Republicans
- Conservatives versus Liberals
- Cat People versus Dog People

We do this in the church too. (Maybe we especially do this in the church.)

Often we think in terms of who's in and who's out:

- There are members and there are non-members.
- There are leaders and there are followers.
- There are givers and there are takers.
- There are people who dress up for worship and there are people who don't.

And unfortunately we sometimes disparage the ones who aren't like us.

But Paul is saying that everyone has a role, every person who claims to follow Jesus is a member – maybe not in so-called "official" terms as in "your name is on the

⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

*"Christ has no body on earth but yours;
no hands but yours; no feet but yours.
Yours are the eyes through which
Christ's compassion for the world is to look out.
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless others."²*

Her sense was that a single person could serve as multiple parts of the body: we can be the hands and the feet and the eyes.

But Paul seems to be saying that we each have an individual part to play, an individual purpose. And notice that it's God who determines this.

- Maybe God has made you the arms and hands of the church – the kind of person who reaches out to help others.
- Maybe God has made you the backbone of this ministry – your gift is prayer and you are constantly praying for the church and the leaders, the ministries, the vision.
- Maybe you are the heart of the church – the one who exudes joy in all you do.
- Maybe you are the feet – beating the pavement for justice.
- Maybe you are the shoulders – one of the leaders who supports and alters the direction of this ministry.
- Maybe you are the life blood, making it possible for ministry to be carried throughout the whole body by lavishly giving your money.
- Maybe you are the lungs pumping fresh air into the rest of the body by encouraging the other members.

Paul was a genius because he turned the dissension within the Corinthian Church on its head. Members were saying things like:

*I am more essential than you are
because I take the Lord's Supper more seriously than you do.³*

Or:

² Teresa of Avila lived from 1515 to 1582 and she is considered one of three female “doctors of the church” in the Roman Catholic tradition. She founded The Barefoot Carmelites, a mystical religious order.

³ 1 Corinthians 11:20-22

“Practicing Our Faith – The Role of the Congregation”

1 Corinthians 12:12, 14-26

Sermon by Jan Edmiston – June 17, 2007

Fairlington Presbyterian Church

*Note: Corinth was a city in Greece that had been all but destroyed at one point¹ until Julius Caesar re-founded the city in 46 BC. By the time Paul visited there about one hundred years later, Corinth had become a wealthy, diverse, cosmopolitan city with a population of Jews and Greeks, and Romans – many of whom had become followers of Jesus. But there were problems in the Corinthian church: flagrant immorality, dissension, terrible power struggles. Paul had these issues in mind when he wrote this letter to the Christians in Corinth about a new way to see themselves and each other. He described followers of Jesus as *The Body of Christ*.*

The apostle Paul was a theological genius.

Those of us who've been a part of the church for a while are very familiar with the idea of the church as the body of Christ. We use this metaphor during communion, during baptism. We've heard it before. Some of us have heard this metaphor for the church all of our lives.

But imagine hearing this metaphor for the first time: that **each of us who want to follow the way of Jesus plays a part of the whole** just like different organs and appendages and physical features all play a part of the whole human body. As Paul puts it: not everyone is a hand, but that's okay. Those who are the eyes of the church are just as essential as those who are the ears.

Have you ever imagined which part of the body you are in the church? And by “the church” I'm talking about the global community of faith. Maybe you are not an “official member” of this church. Maybe you are not a member officially of any congregation. But if you consider yourself a follower of Jesus, where do you see yourself? Which body part are you?

Personally I'd rather be the spine than a toenail. And who wouldn't rather be the teeth or the legs instead of the tonsils or the armpit? And I'm not even going to mention the earthier body parts.

But think about this for a minute. *What part are you in the body of Christ?*

The great Teresa of Avila, a Spanish saint famously wrote these words:

¹ In 146 BC, a Roman general named Lucius Mummius killed all the men, sold the women and children into slavery, and torched what was left of the city.