

Rev. Michael Moran, Sunday, January 21, 2007

First Congregational Church, New Milford, Connecticut

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

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. 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. 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. 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. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 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. 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. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Sermon: Ritual Re-Incarnation

Did any of you happen to see the picture of the naked Hindu mystics bathing in the Ganges river that was in the paper this past week – one of many festive events that the website of the Indian Cultural Foundation says, “marks the day when the glorious Sun-God of Hindus begins its ascendancy and entry into the Northern Hemisphere.”

I must say that if bathing in January in any river in Connecticut were part of my ministerial duties, then I would have never considered ordination. Not even in a wetsuit, let alone in a birthday suit.

But it is interesting how the place of water, cleansing, bathing, and purification, transcends religious and cultural boundaries and unites a congregation gathered around a baptismal font this morning with people half a world away on the banks of a river flowing down from the high mountains of the Himalayas.

This morning I entitled the sermon “Ritual Re-incarnation” and, of course, reincarnation is a belief central to the Hindu religion. But again there is a difference - our re-incarnation is not the return of soul to human form on its many journeys through life and death, but a re-enactment of the unique and historical incarnation of God the Son in the life of a believer.

Incarnation basically means a living embodiment of an idea or spirit. Today its used for all kinds of topics from arts to technology - like this advertising tagline: Broadband over

Power Lines is the latest incarnation of attempts to utilize power transmission and distribution infrastructure for electronic communications.

But when you're speaking of religion you are speaking not of the attempt to utilize power lines but rather human beings – and not for the transmission of electronic communions, but for the transmission of the will and word, purpose and power of God – transmission of good news to transform the world.

To open one of his letters the Apostle Paul wrote: Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

So we celebrate at Christmas that the eternal Son of God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was fully human and so was here for a time and then was gone. How is God's glory reflected in his absence? How is the imprint of God's being present when we cannot see his face? How is God's powerful world active in sustaining the world when that compelling voice has been hushed? That same voice that spoke with authority to the synagogue in Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The answer is that although absent, Jesus abides in the believer, in the disciples, in the community of the faithful, in the church, the body of Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, as Paul wrote, and you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Like Jesus, our time in this journey of human life is limited. Today is now before us unknown and unrealized; but when evening falls it will be over – it will be past and fulfilled and unchangeable – there will be no going back to make it different. Each moment of each hour that now lie before us – each moment will present us with a choice of what kind of spirit we will incarnate into this world – what kind of spirit we will manifest

to affect and influence the people we love and the people we meet in brief and passing interactions.

Baptism is a reminder of God's invitation to bind our life to the life of Christ to receive the Holy Spirit and be opened to resources greater than our own. As the scripture says: I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:13) Baptism is also a reminder of our freedom and the moral necessity that since we have freedom we need to make choices – will we keep our liberty awake, will we be ready to make decisions that affirm our identity as baptized children of God?

After Jesus washes the disciples feet on the eve of his arrest and execution, he says to them: I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13:15) We are each examples to each other and especially to our children. But it is more even than being an example – we are incarnating a spirit that is in a sense infectious because it changes the person it touches. If the spirit we transmit is born of the love of God, then the touch is a blessing.

In the next few hours we will face any number of decisions. In each interaction we have choices to incarnate a spirit of strength, compassion, and mercy – or to embody our frustrations, our resentments, our guilt, our fear – to withhold our kindness or to give it away – to speak a word of judgments or a word of understanding and reconciliation – to affirm our vows of baptism or to turn away and walk a different path.

The composer Jerome Williams gives a good summary of this sermon in his song No Hands But Yours

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

No, we don't have to shed our woolens and bathe on the banks of the Housatonic this morning – we have been blessed with the ritual of baptism, a ritual we make real in our world when we choose to be the body of Christ each moment of our lives.