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Arnold D. Weigel

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We Have Met The Church, and She is Us!¹

Arnold D. Weigel

*Associate Professor of Practical Theology,
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Waterloo*

Text: Romans 12:5-6

In the mid-1980s Marlene Wilson, internationally renowned for her excellent workshops and conferences on volunteerism, noted:

On a visit to the supermarket, as I walked down the aisle where dried fruit was displayed, I was struck by a startling thought. The dried prunes, apricots, and pears all neatly packaged in cellophane bags sitting in a row on a shelf reminded me of many of our churches today. The message over that shelf could well have read: "Take some. You may not like us, but we're good for you." So—dutifully—some people chew the prunes. In the same way— dutifully—some people become involved in church activities. Somehow I cannot believe that is what the church was meant to be. As I read the Gospels, I see other images:

- Salt that seasons the stew.
- Yeast that leavens the loaf.
- Wildflowers showering color on a drab hillside.
- Clear sparkling mountain streams singing on their way, rushing water to a thirsty land.
- A quiet touching of two human beings searching for meaning in a world gone mad.
- Reverent prayer in the midst of the clanging machinery of a modern city.
- A caring word in an uncaring world.
- Searchers coming together to love, strengthen, and enable one another as they eagerly celebrate Word and sacrament together so they can go out and be the church in their daily places.²

When Marlene Wilson speaks of the church in this dynamic way, she is quite close to the apostle Paul's sense of church as articulated in Romans 12:5-6 "So we, though many, are

one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them."

Today is a special day for Dale Finch, his wife Donna and their family. Within the last few months, much has happened in their lives as Dale has finished his studies at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, received and accepted a call into full-time ministry, been ordained a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church In Canada and moved from Kitchener-Waterloo to Belleville. At the ordination service on June the 8th, Dale was set apart within the faith community to full-time ministry; today through this installation service, Dale is set into this setting, this context of the place, the people, the community in which he will practice the ministry entrusted to him at ordination.

On a day like this, it's so easy to think of church and ministry as *pastoral* ministry. There's a sense in which that is where the focus is. Yet both Marlene Wilson and the apostle Paul give us images of the church and of ministry that are more dynamic and more inclusive. To paraphrase Walt Kelley's cartoon sage Pogo: "We have met the church, and she is us!"

This is a truth well worth pondering, especially in a time when people are wondering about the future of the church, the relevance of the church, the appropriate images and experiences of the church. While the apostle Paul certainly can appreciate that the church is a building, an organization, an institution, to him the church is primarily the people of God who by God's grace constitute the body of Christ.

Frederica Harris Thompsett in *We Are Theologians* records a fable from the Middle Ages which helps clarify the differing perspectives on the church as institution and the church as God's people. It is called "The Cathedral and The Well", and consists of three Acts.

Act One: The setting is a desert which, like all deserts, has to be crossed. In the middle of this desert is a well, fed by an underground spring of fresh, loud, rushing water. This particular well is fortunately located just at the point where thirsty pilgrims need refreshment if they are to survive and continue on their way. So in those days news got about that it was relatively safe to cross the desert as long as you listened for the sound of the spring and stopped to drink from the well. Generations of pilgrims were able

to cross the desert and head into the wilderness—which is where God's people were usually traveling.

Act Two: Many years later news spreads of a building in the middle of the desert, a cathedral of great beauty. Throughout the years pilgrims, when they passed, had dropped stones (some fancier than others) to mark the location of the wellspring, an improvement which they hoped would show their respect for the well. Soon a cathedral stands in the middle of this desert, one stone buttressing another. Pilgrims stop, look up and admire the cathedral from a distance. Yet most of them are close to death from thirst when they approach. They can neither hear the sounds of rushing water nor see the well, now covered by stones.

Act Three: Centuries later, in the same desert, one very thirsty pilgrim dares to approach the cathedral, now overgrown by weeds after years of neglect. She (most late medieval pilgrims were women) notices that a stone was loose. Pulling it out, so that she might replace it correctly, she hears the sound of rushing waters! She rediscovers the well and invites her companions to drink of its life-giving waters. Soon news spreads of the cathedral *and* of the well. The cathedral was imperfectly built, always standing in need of repair; the well, which stood in its midst, is free-flowing. Future generations of pilgrims, sighting the familiar landmark of the cathedral, draw close to the well, drink of its springs, and live to cross the desert.³

This medieval parable draws a sharp distinction between church as institution and church as people. It clearly shows how "too much church" can keep one from drawing life from the life-giving wells of God's "living water". Church as institution dare not deprive us of the opportunity to be and to experience church as the people of God; like the pilgrims in this parable we need to ask ourselves: Do biblical wellsprings define our church and encourage new life? Do others receive nourishment through our being and through our loving acts of service? Or do we simply go through the routines dutifully? It is critical that each generation undertakes responsibility for passing on the story, making sure that we do not cover up the well with the magnificence of our cathedrals or with our neglect.

We have met the church, and she is us!

Within our text, Paul emphasizes important dimensions of ministry and of discipleship. "So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use

them." In this text, Paul is addressing ministry in a wholistic way. He is including in his emphasis and concerns the ministry of those ordained into the priesthood and he is embracing the ministry of all the baptized. I wish to explore, albeit briefly, three exciting truths in these abiding words of Paul.

In a time in our history and civilization when there is a strong tendency not only to look out for No. 1 but to define No. 1 as me, it is refreshing to hear that "we are one body in Christ". Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted rightly "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ....What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity."⁴ How gratifying to hear this focus on community in Christ! It is a welcome word of love and intimacy in a time when rampant individualism gives rise to much loneliness and anxiety about loneliness.

Though many, we are one body in Christ.

It is clear from these emphases that ministry is a matter of relationships—living relationships with God, with one another and with others. Today is not a placing of the ministerial duties on Dale Finch's shoulders alone; today is a recognition that in this place, and within his community leadership, *mutual ministry* within the radiance of Christ's Cross will be undertaken. I am convinced that God has always intended it to be so. Was it not the advice of Jethro (Exodus 18:18) to his son-in-law Moses: "This is too much for you to do alone. You will wear yourself out. You will need to appoint others to assist you."? Indeed. Did not Jesus find it necessary to call to his side designated co-workers? Indeed. Did not the apostle Paul choose co-leaders and appoint them to responsible positions in the mission congregations? Indeed. It is too much to do alone. Ministry is a function of the whole community, of the Body of Christ. We are one in the body of Christ.

Paul goes on. He proclaims that we are gifted people. His acknowledgement is: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us." In *gifts of grace*, the author Mary Schramm states:

During the past... years I have had the privilege of sharing with many groups the gospel message that each of us is chosen to be a

special member of the body of Christ. Though we are each given grace-gifts, I *am amazed at how ungifted people feel*...In a culture where big, more and flashy are success words, we tend to view with some embarrassment our insignificant gifts. After all, doesn't a gift have to be outstanding before we share it with another?"⁵

Within a society in which there is so much "knock-down competition", constantly damaging people's self-esteem, it is refreshing to hear Paul's emphasis on giftedness—a grace-filled God-given giftedness. Ministry is a matter of discerning, encouraging and sharing of gifts. "So often we spend time wishing we were someone else instead of being excited about the person we are. We also waste energy by remaking others in our image instead of affirming who *they* are."⁶

We are gifted people within the body of Christ, each given a giftedness for sharing with others, for serving others.

And then Paul emphasizes something that is tough to do in a society that is frequently marked by "sitting back and waiting"; he says: "Let us use them."

We are living witnesses; as people of God we are living parables whose stories are told both in who we are and in what we do—all for the sake of Christ Jesus. "I must decrease so that the Christ in me can increase." How opposite to me needing to be No. 1! Not only is Paul begging us to use our giftedness for the sake of the kingdom, but he is pleading with us not to get our priorities mixed up.

In 1940, Evelyn Underhill—a scholar, mystic, conductor of retreats—wrote to members of a prayer group about tensions in church and ministry. As you listen to her words, ask yourself whether these words could be spoken in 1990.

Most of you are very busy, and often too tired or anxious to clear the space which is needed for concentration on God's worship. Practical life presses more and more hardily. Strain is increasing. We are all more and more conscious of the uncertainties of our time. Not everyone can face the results of an air raid with an unshaken belief in the goodness of the universe and the loving-kindness of God. Institutional religion too often seems stiff, disappointing, remote from actuality in contrast to the awful realities of evil, danger, suffering, and death among which we live.⁷

Underhill's emphasis on "this-worldly service to people in need" in order to give expression to God's abiding love for God's people underscores how it is that whenever we participate in ministry "we meet the church, and she is us". Underhill's message, though written in the 1940s, stands for our times as well.

We are one body in Christ.

We are gifted people.

We are living witnesses to the Gospel.

“We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”

And as we do so, let it be said by us and of us: “We have met the church, and she is us!”

Notes

- ¹ Installation Sermon, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Belleville, Ontario, September 9, 1990.
- ² Marlene Wilson, *How To Mobilize Church Volunteers* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1983) 11-12.
- ³ Frederica Harris Thompsett, *We Are Theologians* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1989) 11-12.
- ⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954) 11.
- ⁵ Mary R. Schramm, *gifts of grace* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982) 12, 28 [Emphases mine].
- ⁶ Ibid. 43.
- ⁷ Quoted in Thompsett, 51.