

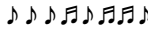
## CELL THE CHURCH

Text on Sunday, May 16, 2010

1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

Religious leaders, Jesus tells his disciples, “love to have people call them ‘reverend’ and ‘doctor.’ But you are not to be called that,” he says, “for you have one great teacher. And call no one Father, for you have one Father— in heaven— and *you* are all brothers and sisters. Nor are you to be called master, for you have one Master, Christ.” (Matt. 23: 6ff) So what am I doing up here? Well, as you know, not expecting you to call me “Rev.” Nevertheless, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, as I am given to do. It is a question of how I am a member of the body of Christ, having a certain something to do. But I get concerned about the tradition of the sermon and of the whole worship service.

My concern is not-to-be merely entertaining, so that like a good movie or a musical concert, the satisfaction of this hour stands by itself as “a good time.” Worship needs rather to shift the ground under our feet, to get us off center so that we take full responsibility for the gravity of our life. If the hour were too entertaining, it would have no consequences, The great Dutch philosopher Spinoza wrote, “Whatever thought is not interrupted by another thought becomes action.” To take action, then—which is the opposite of being entertained—requires one thing: no permanent interruptions of thought. Yet ordinary worship traditions run the risk of *always* interrupting the thought from last week, *always* changing the subject with a new thought this week, never buckling down, or buckling up, to drive toward one goal.

Evangelist Juan Carlos Ortiz offers a biting critique of sermon patterns. “Imagine,” he says, “one or two hundred people pressing into a concert hall for weekly piano instruction. The maestro declares, ‘Now, our lesson for the day.’ With masterful hands, he plays a great concerto... , beginning to end. ‘Very good, students. Go home and practice that. Come back next Sunday at eleven o'clock and we will have our next lesson.’” A sermon is too much like that, Ortiz says—part of “a speech-centered conceptual religion” incapable of teaching how to live as a disciple of Christ.

Now, a sermon is a monologue. It *can* work, but it can also get in the way of work—inner work and social work. This much is clear. Monological church is illogical church. Only dialogical church works, and dialogue only takes place in smaller groups. Therefore, it is essential to “cell the church”— to develop patterns so that every person in the church is connected to the whole body as a cell is to an organ, and an organ functions as part of the whole body; where everyone knows how she works and no one thinks his part more or less important than another’s. “For we were all baptized into one body and made to drink of one Spirit.”

Think tiny with me for a moment. How extraordinary is an individual living cell. If in the hand or the head or the heart, the function of each cell is distinct and complex and so different from the cells of other organs. Still, all cells have two things in common: One, no cell works alone. As Paul says, “If all were a single member, where would the body be?” And two, all cells together, however different, serve one body, not themselves. In fact, medicine calls cells that serve only themselves “cancer cells.” They grow fantastically but with no purpose except to make much of themselves. Living cells grow to serve. Lately, we have also been learning about those amazing master cells called T-cells, which allow themselves—humble themselves!—to become any particular kind of cell the body needs them to be. Some of you are T-cells, ready to learn how you can serve. Some of you already are a cell in an organ of this organized church.

This morning, you have an opportunity to help cell this church. In a minute, a representative from every part of the body of this church is going to say briefly what her and his committee is responsible for. In other words, every organ of the church is going to speak. Then they will go to various corners around the sanctuary while you move around among them, asking questions, listening, learning how you can *cell* yourself.

Here are three ways to listen. 1. Several of our church’s organs simply do not have enough cells to function properly. The individual at the center is being worn out with too much work—and we know that “if one

member suffers, all suffer together.” Make it a point now to go and learn which of your committee people are working too hard, and too alone. Pray for him, pray for her—and discern whether you are called to be the next cell in that organ. 2. There may be something brand new you want to do through the church—start a new group, say. You need support, resources, connections. If that describes your case, these church members are prepared to help you find what you need. Listen for which of these organs can best support your vision. Then go and talk with that leader. Leave your name on the sign-up sheet for more conversation later. 3. For some of you, it is hard to get out; certainly not at night. You may think, *Because I am not strong and young, I do not really belong to the body the way they do.* But this is not the word of the gospel. From your chair, in prayer, you can serve this body. From your phone at home, you can call and touch this body. Go now and find out how you can cell this church.

*Rev. Stephen H. Phelps*

*First Presbyterian Church  
Brooklyn, New York*

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