

## ***Break! What is the Church?***

### ***Introduction:***

Well, friends! We're still in the middle of our break from Matthew. We've talked about how we can make use of the New Year to make Christian resolutions, talked about what it means to make decisions as those who are becoming like Jesus, and how to define what is good and right as we do. Today we're talking about the Church, generally: What it is and isn't.

Next week we'll bring many of these things together--I hope--as we talk about ourselves, Smoky Row, and our place in the world.

But I hope today to review for us what it means to be a part of the Church. If anything I say is new to us, I'll be surprised by it. And yet, you know, we can so easily lose track of what it means to be the church that I think review isn't such a bad thing.

Let's pray.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Images: Alternative Society***

The Bible uses all sorts of metaphors to talk about what it means to be the church.

There's the metaphor of alternative society to the one

we live in. A society is just a way that people order life when they come together. We think of “high society,” or, say, some “Society for the Establishment of Thingamabob Piggie-Wiggle” or something or other. Groups of people gathered around particular ways of living that are uniquely their own.

The difference between societies like this, and the Church as an Alternative Society is that “high society” or “the Franklin County Genealogical Society” are not in major conflict with our greater American society, right? They function inside it, within it, as its partner or its leech or its advocate. But the Church doesn’t. It’s a society that bears witness against the way the larger world is ordered, and it offers an alternative way to live in the world.

We see this in Acts all over the place. For example, In Acts 17, Paul and Silas arrive in Thessalonica, they cause a ruckus because so many people have become Christians. They are staying at Jason’s house--nice house, right? Jason’s?

And they’re out and about one day, when some upset folks from the synagogue raid Jason’s, drag him and some other Christians to city hall, prop them up and start:

***“These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here, too--and Jason***

***entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus"***

“And the people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this.” Not unreasonable, right? To say that there’s another king named Jesus is to say that Caesar isn’t king anymore, that he’s being deposed, and since the party line was that the entire order of the empire, of the whole world, depended on Caesar’s rule, this was disturbing. This was treason, this was anti-society, “turning the world upside down,” and rabble-rousing. The Church was an enemy of the state.

But this was the Church. The word we translate Church is “Ekklesia”--the “called out ones,” the group “called out of” society so that it can bear witness to God’s rule over creation. We’re an alternative society led by an alternative king, Jesus, whose government rests on his shoulders, and his rules determine how people should live.

As Paul and others went about living for Jesus, Caesar’s rules and order were being dismantled through the new society of “called out ones,” through the way that as Acts summarizes it, “all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”

This is one image that the Bible communicates to us of what the Church is supposed to be in the world. I don't hate it when we habitually use the word "church" to talk about the building we're in right now, instead of the group of us and the alternative society we're a part of, as long as we realize this building is really an outpost, or a foreign embassy--a place where we ambassadors--a word that originally meant servant--we ambassadors join together to do a little bit of preparation before we go out in the world to do the work of our sovereign nation and its king.

### ***Images: Bride***

The "I'm so hardcore I eat metal for Jesus" movement doesn't embrace this one much, but the Bible talks about the church as "Jesus' bride." Jesus is the groom, and the Church is Jesus' bride.

Paul uses this image in Ephesians especially. There, he starts by saying that Christians should be subject to one another--should submit to one another--out of reverence for Christ. And it seems like he goes on to talk about husband and wife relationships, and he does, but what he's really talking about--his model for how a marital relationship should work--is Jesus' relationship to the Church. He quotes the old testament, saying:

***"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two***

***will become one flesh. This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church. Each of you, however, should love his wife as himself, and a wife should respect her husband.”***

In this image, this metaphor, Jesus is the husband, and we the Church are the wife, and Jesus has joined himself to the church, cast his lot with the church, serves the church, in every way that a husband can join himself to his wife.

In another place, Paul reacts to the Corinthian church's terrible habits by saying that “I promised you in marriage to one husband,” and his point is that the Corinthians are sleeping around, when they're supposed to be looking forward to their wedding day--in this image, it's Jesus' return--and all the change in their life that that will bring.

And of course, there's the famous image of the Church as Jesus' bride from Revelation, when John sees a vision of the end of all things, and writes:

***6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:***

***“Hallelujah!  
For our Lord God Almighty reigns.***

**7 Let us rejoice and be glad  
and give him glory!  
For the wedding of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready.  
8 Fine linen, bright and clean,  
was given her to wear.”**

**(Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of  
God’s holy people.)**

**9 Then the angel said to me, “Write this:  
Blessed are those who are invited to the  
wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added,  
“These are the true words of God.”**

Later in Revelation, in the New Heaven and New Earth creation, when John sees the New Jerusalem descending from Heaven as the place where God makes his home, the city itself is described “as a bride adorned for her husband,” as “the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

This is a basic biblical image of the Church: a bride on her wedding day, who has been preparing for the day, whose been lavished with gifts from her soon-to-be husband, and is excited about consummating the marriage. It’s a little awkward.

This image of the Church as Jesus’ bride depends on us knowing some really great marriages, where

spouses are constantly loving selflessly and living for the best of each other. It's not the handiest metaphor, unfortunately, though, because those sort of marriages are uncommon at best.

### ***Images: Body***

But by far the most used and powerful image in the New Testament of what the Church is like is the metaphor Paul makes of the Church as Christ's Body on earth, with him as it's head, and we as interconnected body parts, which are only really useful because we've been brought together.

He talks about this all over the place: In Romans, in Ephesians, in Colossians. But the most quoted passage is 1 Corinthians 12. You've heard this before:

***12 Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.***

***15 Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of***

***the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. 19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body.***

***21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.***

As an image, this is powerful, because it reminds us that we owe each other our usefulness, that if we shut down, the body of Christ on earth suffers, just like our bodies suffer if an organ or a hand is lost. And so the effectiveness of the Church, what God would have us



do for the world; it suffers, too. And as parts of the body of Christ, when we don't "act our part," we ourselves end up suffering, too--because an organ's health is affected by the body it's in.

And Paul is writing to local congregations here while also talking about the larger worldwide capital-C Church--this image of the Body, this metaphor, it's scalable.

But for Paul, while we may be Christ's body on earth, and may be all different sort of body parts, there's one body part that he says none of us are: the Head. Jesus is the head of this body. In Ephesians, Paul says that "speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." We're supposed to act in a certain ways, so that we mature into certain types of people--people who are like Jesus personally, and as that happens, we become--collectively, taken all together--congregations who are like Jesus.

This metaphor of the Body has implications for us, for our life together.

***Body of Christ: Implications: Unity, Calling, Health Assessment***

It implies unity. Body parts aren't supposed to fight against one another; they are supposed to work together toward a common goal. For the capital-C church this means all the things that would come to mind: glorifying God, bearing witness to the message of the Gospel, serving the poor and powerless.

For us, a local body, a local congregation, it means the same things, but it also means gathering around our core values, gathering around our vision, gathering around the programs and partnerships that God has given us: it means coming together as the unique congregation we are and we are being made into.

God always gives his churches everything that they need to get the work done that he's called them to do. We are each of us gifted in different or similar ways, but we're called to figure out how we best fit together so that our small body of Christ can be as healthy as possible. I mean, thumbs are very important, but you don't want them instead of a urethra, right? And of course we each take ourselves to the doctor now and then, not simply if we're sick and need advice or healing, but being Christ's body here means that we need occasional check-ups, too, from people who are really good at diagnosing troubles and evaluating health.

### ***Body of Christ: Differences & Denominations***

Let me talk a little bit more about unity in the Body.

Unity in the Body doesn't mean that we all agree all the time; in fact, most of us disagree about all sorts of stuff. It does mean that we pursue one another's good no matter what, it means that we create a space where we can collectively decide what we must agree on as Christians and as Christians here in this place, as Smoky Row. We bless one another in our differences, we seek to deal with conflict biblically. Unity often means we submit our preferences to the purpose God has for our congregation.

Each local congregation, each local body, has unique purposes that God gives to it for the unique seasons of its life. One way to know if we as a congregation--or even as individuals--are walking in step with Christ is to examine whether or not we are living out God's purposes for us, or living out some pursuit of our own preferences, which we feel are right.

Sometimes this means that the body of Christ has to stumble around for awhile talking to itself to figure out what's going on and praying to God to guide it. This is why we at Smoky Row have congregational meetings, Governance Team Meetings, the reason I have a cell phone and our leaders make themselves available to us: it's so we can reject our preferences, which vary so widely, and come to unity on our purpose, and what we need to attain it.

Some people, who are oriented very much toward unity in the capital-C body of Christ, raise issues with regard to denominations, which they see as the fracturing of the Church.

Frankly, I have no problem with denominations any more than I do with congregations: the world is a place of different people in different places with different views of what is most important when it comes to following Jesus. And beyond this, God is a God of order not of chaos: we don't expect to come together in this world and have a worship service in five or six languages all at once--although we'd love something like that now and then, if it's understandable.

But there are many valid ways of being a Christian, and it is good for those of like-mind to gather together around particular ways of being Christian, so that they can practice unity of purpose all the more.

I do think that it's part of Smoky Row's DNA to be a place where we live a prophetically multicultural life--where we speak against the divisive nature of the world, while also looking forward to the world to come, in which all differences will give way to perfect unity of a well-prepared Bride. I hope we can be a place where people from different economic classes, and levels of or interest in education, and ages, and political convictions, and even the three biggies--languages

and ethnicities and races--are joined into the one body around the purposes God has given us.

We aren't there yet, but we are on our way.

### ***Body of Christ: Ethics & the Holy Spirit***

Remember that passage from Ephesians that was read to us a few minutes ago?

***“We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness...But Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (RSV).***

Paul is contrasting deceit with truth. We're a body that talks to itself, and "truth in love" is what is supposed to come out of our mouths when we are in conversation with one another. Some of us err on the side of truth; some of us err on the side of love, but Paul says that when we talk to one another, we have to speak truth with love wrapped all around it.

This isn't easy. And it doesn't get any easier when the fact is that a major chunk of the truth that we're

supposed to be speaking is the truth of how well or poorly each part--each one of us--is doing in our reliance on the Holy Spirit to become like Jesus.

The image of the church as the body of Christ is helpful because we're reminded that we're not simply accountable to God for our behaviors; we're accountable to one another. "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it," Paul reminds us, and we remember that sin does cause suffering, and so the sin in our lives, it causes suffering in our lives, and if in our lives, so in our congregation.

This is just a truth. We have impact here on one another. The only way not to have impact here is to remove ourselves, and even then, that's painful and costly to the Body of Christ that we are. I mean, I can live on one lung, right? Not ideal, and not easy, and not great. And even if I get another one given to me, it's going to take a long time to get used to it.

And more than causing suffering, the interconnected nature we have as parts in this Body of Christ demands that we live in service, love, and peace with one another. In Galatians, Paul tells the church "through love become slaves to one another." But if we "bite and devour one another," instead, he says, we should be careful, because we're likely "to be consumed by one another."

A body that doesn't have breath, doesn't have blood, isn't alive, right? No matter what head it has on its shoulders. And our blood and our breath as the Body of Christ, as Smoky Row, as any local church, is the Holy Spirit. It's what allows us to live, to move, to have our being, to pursue the purpose God has for us, and to walk forward into the future that God is shaping for us. The Spirit bears fruit among us, as we work together the way we're supposed. The famous "fruit of the Spirit" passages isn't just about the sort of character Christians are supposed to have, it's about the sort of character the Church is supposed to have.

And it's a character modeled after the life that was lived by the head on our shoulders, Jesus.

***16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.***

***19 The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness,***

***orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.***

***22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness and self-control...25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.***

We lean into the Holy Spirit, breathe deeply, and the breath of God gives rise to these things among us. Paul goes on to talk about how we have to “carry each other’s burdens” but still “carry our own load,” how we can’t compare ourselves to someone else, but we’re supposed to pay close enough attention to others that we can help “restore someone caught in a sin gently”-- if of course we are living by the Spirit. These are tensions, right? But they make sense in light of what Paul said in Corinthians: we are body parts, we are distinct, we are individuals, but our good is tightly tied up in the good of one another. We are a body of many parts.

This is the Church, the Body of Christ.

And this high ethical life that we’re to lead as the Body of Christ: It’s a challenge to all of us. Paul says in 1 Corinthians that we shouldn’t even eat with someone



who is “sexually immoral, or greedy, or an idolater, reviler, drunkard, robber.” In 2 Corinthians, though, while talking about someone the Church has confronted in sin, and has asked to leave, Paul reminds them that they “should forgive and console [the sinner], so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrows.” Paul urges the church to “reaffirm your love for him.” We are a body of many parts, and if the parts become cancerous, working against us, but yet are healed again, we turn to them in embrace. We speak the truth in love; and the truth is that this body of ours wasn’t made for disobedience but for faithfulness--and for forgiveness, humility, and gentleness--among its parts.

### ***Conclusion:***

Here’s what I know: You get out what you put in. We are people who have been trained to want great benefits without great costs. We want high return on investment, no matter how little we invest. This is just what we’ve learned, what we’ve been taught, how Wall Street and a celebrity culture and the lottery are constantly shaping us.

But we are becoming more like Jesus all the time, together. We are feeding the hungry, and satiating the thirst of the parched. Through partnerships and programs that we have right now with other churches, we are caring for the orphan and the widow. We are noting the least of these, and helping them more

and more all the time. And of course, we do this as a body that speaks the truth in love and given the chance, we must connect this work to Jesus, the head on our shoulders.

We can maybe buy the idea that the church is the hope of the world, that as far as institutions go, there isn't another one that can do what we can do if we just rely on the power God has given us, but to say that the church is the hope of each of our souls--that we can only be at our best if we give of ourselves, to say that we're interconnected, and that your health does depend on mine, and vice-versa--that's a hard thing to buy, even if the Bible says it's true, even if we've experienced its truth in our past.

And to not just give of our time, or talents, or our treasure, but to embrace vulnerability and authenticity with one another so that we might be sharpened into maturity? That's an even harder sell.

And if you have not grabbed hold of the purpose of Smoky Row: if you have not thought about our core values, written on the back of our bulletin, or been thankful for the ways God has enabled us to live them out, if you have not engaged in the ministries that we are doing together, then I promise us something: purpose will be replaced by preference, and our preferences will become more important than why we are here, why we form this community we form, and

what God is doing in the lives of those we take communion with, recite prayers with, make promises to every Sunday.

How can I help you own your place here? How can I help you to realize all that God has made you to be in this church? We need big toes and hearts and livers and all the things that a body is made up of; we need one another. We need each other. If any part of a body decides to shut down, the rest of the body suffers.

Finally, this: I am so grateful for you. You all have weathered my exhaustion and my fears and my nearly-annual burn-out, my friendship and my work. We have shared life together, some of us more than others, we have sought faithfulness together, and are becoming more like Jesus all the time: we are joining together to pursue God's Love, become more like Jesus, and expand God's Kingdom through word and deed.

We have felt the impact, power, and purpose of Smoky Row realized, have seen together the glory of God celebrated as the Spirit has worked through our simple trust in Him. This is a gift. The road ahead of us extends into a future we can't measure; it's as long as it takes for Jesus to return. But our traveling companions are sweet. The Church is an amazing thing, and no metaphor is big enough to carry all its meaning. But God has draped its meaning on our

shoulders, the shoulders of the body of Christ that Smoky Row is, so that we can experience how good the Christian life can be. Let's encourage one another in faithfulness, thank God for new people we come to love and old, sweet friendships, and walk by the Spirit that is our blood and breath in this body of many parts that we are.