

23 January 2022, The 3rd Sunday after The Epiphany: I Corinthians 12:12-31

What does this mean, “I am a Christian?” What do you mean when you say it? If we spent time today in discussion, there would likely be many and varied responses. Regardless of one’s thoughts and assumptions, in today’s second reading Paul widens our definition of what it means to say, “I am a Christian.”

First, we observe that being a Christian is about believing in Jesus as Lord. In the ancient world that meant Jesus is God, the highest authority, the One to whom our allegiance is owed. Christianity is not a philosophy of life, a moral code, or a way of getting on in life. To be a Christian is to seek a relationship with a person, a person believed to be the ultimate revelation of God, the ultimate vision of humanity.

Paul then reminds us we are members of one Body with everyone else following Jesus. Nearly all of 1st Corinthians is about the reality, the responsibilities, and the obligations of being within the Body of Christ. Paul writes: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* Christians are part of a common life and work. One’s own prayer, worship, charity, and works of mercy are not a stand-alone affair. No matter how grand and public, or hidden and unseen, we offer ourselves *to Christ, with fellow Christians, for others.*

This has wide implications. For example, one’s money offerings to the Church are not an “investment,” a duty, or charity. Our gifts to the Church are one’s fullest possible participation supporting the largest possible ministries to insure the continued spread of the Gospel and the continued support of everyone in the Church from the infant in our own nursery to the unknown fellow-Christians in other parishes, towns, states and even countries who with us seek to follow and serve Christ. We are not defined only by what does or does not happen at 408 S. Lee Street, Americus, Georgia. We are members of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church across time and space into eternity, with millions of billions of saints of every cultural, ethnic, racial, and other human distinction. With Christ we are together the Body of Christ.

The next point is this: all the members of the Body are one and no one is dispensable. We can be tempted to consider Paul’s words in I Corinthians 12 a greeting card kind of thing—just pretty words. Paul is always shockingly realistic. He was quite aware of the failings and crankiness of Christians; if you doubt this, read all of I Corinthians. Everyone is important, everyone belongs. Indeed, those whom we might consider difficult are vitally important so we may learn to love the otherwise unlovable for Christ’s sake, for their sakes, and for one’s own sake. So that we might serve them, may slowly learn and practice Christ’s own patient, redeeming love; As the 4th Century Bible commentator Ambrosiaster wrote: *The unity of the Body consists in the fact that its many members supply the things which the other parts lack.* God gifts us with the cantankerous so that we may learn how to love as He loves us.

We can forget we are called to be servants. A true test of servanthood is how we act, serve, think, and speak when there is no hope of recognition or thanks. There *should* be thanks when we serve someone; giving thanks completes the reception of what is offered. Yet someone’s failure to acknowledge our efforts does not make the offering any less real, or less valuable to them or us, or less pleasing to God. Indeed, there is strong evidence suggesting that God is more pleased with our service when it is secret and unacknowledged (see Matthew 6:1-6). All service *in Christ’s Name* is always *to Christ, through* the one we serve.

Lastly, the more a part of the Body of Christ we are, the more joy will be ours. However, this will likely not be experienced as instant gratification. The life to which Christians are called is one of growth and conversion into eternity. Growing is serious business that takes time, patience, and good, fertile soil. Conversion involves surrender of self and trust in God’s wisdom and ways, the assurance that in Christ our lives are progressing as they ought. And the joy is so much more, so much deeper, higher, and lasting than mere happy contentment. It is the joy of fulfillment, of true identity in and for Christ: of wanting to be and growing toward the saints whom God has made us to be. So, let us be Christians not only in name, but in thought, word, and deed.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and forever. Amen.