

CHAOS THEORY AND THE BODY OF CHRIST

By Pastor Lynice Pinkard

At the “fireside chat” on Sunday and in dozens of recent conversations, our collective longing to become an alternative community serving the common good has been palpable. What does this really look like?

Corinthians tells us that “We are one body, with many members, all fueled and powered by the Spirit of Christ”, and the possibilities of using our infinite variety of gifts to serve God’s kingdom through the power of the Holy Spirit are endless—those of us who are feet can walk, those who are mouths can talk—powerful! Paul was trying to persuade the people in Corinth *that wholeness was a matter of many different parts all being themselves and doing their jobs*. In other words, *unity and diversity are not contradictory terms*. They are two words for one paradoxical reality, *namely that our survival depends not on our sameness but on our infinite variety*. So far, this is good news for an intentionally multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-faith-perspective church like ours. And yet in practice it doesn’t seem so simple. In fact, it seems a lot like chaos.

The problem begins when you put me, with all of my particularities, attachments, dearly held beliefs, and ideas, in a community with a bunch of other people who look, smell, think, talk and act differently from me and who all have their own particularities. “Now you are the body of Christ,” Paul says, “and individually members of it,” but we have not all been “baptized into one body by the Spirit” to create a bunch of individual folks who have their own agendas or who are on their own trip. The age of the Holy Spirit is not the age of superstars struggling alone to change the world. It’s the age of the Holy-Spirit-infused community.

What is a Holy Spirit infused community? David Augsburg says, *“it is an alternative to human communities that live by coercion, competition, and collective self-interest.”* It is an *alternative* community. It is an *incarnational* community—a community that immerses itself in a culture of otherness and engages that otherness, as Jesus did, without the protection of weapons. It is a *resurrection* community—a community that transcends its own self and group interests and crosses over into solidarity with others, rising above itself. This is where the rubber of the Corinthians passage meets the road. No more us and them. No more save us by abandoning them. No more heal us by injuring them. No more free us by binding them. No more enliven us by killing them. NO MORE!!

This is not so hard when we are talking about lungs not fighting livers, but what about when we are talking about the varieties of identities in the body of Christ? This becomes the challenge of the Corinthians

passage. Making a commitment to live in the solidarity of Holy Spirit infused community means that we can *no longer absolutize our individual identities*; I no longer get to absolutize my understanding of who and what I am. I have an individual identity, but I do not really know what it is, or rather, I no longer know exactly who I am becoming. Why? Because in community, I, and everyone else, will change to form an organic new creation, and I don't know yet what that will look like or exactly who I will be as a part of that creation. But, at the same time, *I* will not be lost. I can trust the Spirit of life that *I* will be a unique manifestation of God's glory. I will uniquely manifest what God looks like in the world, and perhaps, I will no longer look like me. I may lose my identities, but I will not lose my *self* because my self will be based on the collective power of God's life in me, *as* I immerse myself in the Spirit of love-seeking and love-making community. In community, I will be alchemized by the Spirit's life, and the promise of God is that I will have the power to live the Spirit's life and love out, even if I don't look like me. In community, Christ changes us and adapts us ALL so that we can express the life of the Spirit organically.

Much of the Holy Spirit's work in community is to ensure that each of us and all of us only retain the parts of ourselves that have been transformed by the Spirit's life. You don't get to keep and hold on to you, in the Holy Spirit infused community, just because you are you. Some of what is *us* does not work for the flourishing of all life. Some of what *is* our groups does not work for the flourishing of all life. Some of the stuff that mama and daddy said, some of the stuff that we learned at the university and perfected on our jobs and in our careers does not work for the flourishing of all life. The Holy Spirit exists in us to ensure that we are fueled by Christ's own DNA and that we only get to retain that which works for the flourishing of all life. But that means struggle and conflict and bumping up against one another; that means being willing to pour ourselves out into the communal cup of God's life to quench the world's thirst, holding nothing back, "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."

So, you joined a community looking for what?—closeness? support? some measure of safety? And nine times out of ten what you get instead is this holy struggle to live and work with people who are just as crazy and angular as you are and to be re-made by constant contact with them.

In his book *The Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer defines community as "that place where the person you least want to live with always lives!" And, he adds, when that person moves away someone worse is always there to take his place. Most of us have a romantic notion of community, **but the purpose of community is not to retreat someplace with other like-minded people, but to give ourselves up to the Holy Spirit by learning how to live with and love people that we may not like at all.** What better way to

open ourselves up to a God that is beyond our understanding and ideas and preferences than to open ourselves up to another person who is beyond our understanding and ideas and preferences? What finer way to learn about the reconciling power of Christ than to test it in a body of infinite variety? Even if it looks a little like chaos. In fact, science suggests that's just what it should look like.

Quantum physicists tell us that we have been living under the illusion of separateness for at least three hundred years now, ever since Sir Isaac Newton proposed that the universe worked like a great clock. According to his physics, the world is a collection of individual gears and springs that act in perfectly predictable ways. You can take them apart and put them back together again with no effect on the whole. To understand the clock, you need only understand the parts, which behave in regular and reasonable ways. If that were true, then we could hold onto our own identities with no cost to the whole.

With the discovery of subatomic reality in the twentieth century, however, this illusion of separateness was dispelled. In fact, we learned that the universe behaves much more like a body than a clock. It is not possible to understand the parts without understanding the whole. We cannot even observe an electron without changing the way it acts, because we are all knit together in this invisible, unfathomable web of relationship. It has its own gorgeous order, but it is never entirely predictable, because every time a butterfly beats its wings in that web, every time a cat yawns or a baby sneezes, the whole web shifts to accommodate it. Quantum physics calls that chaos theory. Paul calls it the body of Christ. Quantum physics calls it a *great mystery* that binds us together whether we know it, feel it, like it or not. 1st Corinthians calls it *the Holy Spirit activated in the* incomprehensible chaos of God's bodily life. Our task as an alternative community is, with God's help, to live into this already existing reality.