

*Let us pray: God, unless you fill these words with Your Spirit, they are just words.
Unless You fill us with Your Spirit, we are just people. With You, we become church.
May the Church hear You speak today. Amen.*

There's nothing like going home. Local boy makes good. What a thrill!

"Did you hear, little Jesus is going to read the scroll at service today?"

"Joseph and Mary's boy?"

"Yes! Have you heard about him? He's healing people right and left, miracles all over the place." "Good! We could use a few of those around here..."

And then he goes to the synagogue, unrolls the scroll, reads these words from Isaiah about freedom and deliverance from disease and poverty; rolls it up and... everyone expects a sermon.

Instead he says, "Today this prophecy has been fulfilled."

"The Spirit of God has anointed me to announce peace and wholeness, to set the prisoners free. I'm the One you've been waiting for."

If Jesus had said those words and not been filled with God's Spirit, it would have been blasphemy, madness. In His case, it was simply true. We'll hear next week what effect that had on his listeners. What would you have thought? That he was crazy – or that God was here?

God's promise, the promise of our Good News, is that God is here, because Jesus is here, through the Holy Spirit, in the Word, the Sacraments – and Jesus is here through us. We are His body, his hands, feet, voice, eyes. He's the head, the brain, the nerve center, and we are the body that carries him around, that makes him visible, that carries out God's purposes in the world.

And, like our own bodies, nothing works if we're not connected, coordinated working together, moving in the same direction. Or worse, not moving at all.

Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth because there was conflict and factions and envy and pride all over that community.

Some thought they were superior because they had "flashy" gifts of the Spirit; some thought they were better because of who had baptized them; some would start sharing communion before everyone had even arrived; some made moral choices that others found immoral.

Nothing in that body was pulling together.

These are not the challenges that we face, I'm happy to say – yet we could become more connected as the Body of Christ. I didn't even know what the Christian life was really all about until I started to live it in community, in the church in New York City I started attending as freshman at NYU. A few years after I arrived, they started a prayer group to pray for the church; Soon there were two, and then five, and then close to 15 at its height, 15 groups of ten-to-twelve 20-and 30-somethings meeting every Wednesday. After 6 o'clock eucharist, everyone would go out and get something to eat and then we'd go to prayer groups – do a little bible study, share the concerns for which we wanted prayer, and then we prayed.

I didn't really see how God was working in my own life till I could see God working in others in that group. I didn't really feel God's love and grace for myself until I felt it coming to me through others in that group. My connection to the group strengthened my connection to God – and out of those prayer groups came tremendous outreach ministry: we launched one of the first homeless shelters; we started a chapter of Habitat for Humanity in New York City, the first urban project that group that had; we started a healing ministry and a contemporary worship service. That kind of vibrancy can be ours – as we become more deeply connected.

When we are conscious of being connected to each other, the depth of community can change our lives. The way we become more consciously the Body of Christ is by knowing each other as well as we know ourselves; being open with each other about what's going on in our lives – where we need healing, where we need growth. The Night Prayers crowd has developed that kind of connection; the vestries have; even the By-Laws Committee became really close. It happens as we tell our stories to each other, as we feel comfortable to cry – or to laugh in church, because we are at home in our Body.

If we are conscious of being a Body in Christ, the Body of Christ, then we pray for each other and for the whole body in a way that keeps life flowing. We might see our prayers as an image of the vascular system, all the vessels which carry blood around the body.

They start in the large gathering on Sundays, get filtered through smaller praying groups throughout the week, and to individual “capillaries” who are praying on their own – and somehow the nutrients, the Spirit of Christ, gets to the places most in need of them, and the whole body is given life. One of my hopes is that we will grow more small groups this year, where we sit with each other, share the load with each other, love each other. In the next week, you’ll be asked if you would participate in a small group for Lent – each group can decide whether to be in person or online or hybrid. Say yes!

Yet our vitality as the Christ Churches isn’t based on how well we love each other. That’s easy. Our vitality as the Body of Christ rests on how well we love the stranger, the strange, the estranged. Our bodies are always changing and growing, with new cell growth all the time. Just so the Body of Christ needs to be renewed by new growth, new ideas, new people, who bring stories that become a part of our story, our Body; they may add lines to the face, or strength to the muscles, or a glow to the skin.

And before we seek to welcome anybody, we need to welcome the Holy Spirit. We need to allow God to anoint us with that Spirit as we were anointed at baptism. Without the Holy Spirit’s filling, we are a collection of nice, good-hearted people. With the Spirit filling us, we become Church, a force that cannot be stopped. With the Spirit filling us, we go out into the world as Christ’s Body – not as a collection of individuals, but as ONE body with many members. We gather here, we get filled with Christ’s power, we go and live His mission.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In a real, and perhaps scary way, when we hear these words, we the Body of Christ on earth today, might say, “Today this is fulfilled in our hearing.” Together as one body, one church throughout the world, we can proclaim freedom to the poor, the addicted, the oppressed, the depressed, the repressed. It starts with our being a “we,” a body, welcoming God’s Spirit to fill us direct us, use us, love us. *Amen*

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, **filled with the power of the Spirit**, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring **good news to the poor**. He has sent me to proclaim **release to the captives** and **recovery of sight to the blind**, to let the **oppressed go free**, to **proclaim the year of the Lord's favor**." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 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. Indeed, the **body does not consist of one member but of many**. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.