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3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Today”

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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 favour.'*

*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.'*

Cor 12:12-31

*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 were to 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 were to 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 honourable we clothe with greater honour, 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 honour 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 honoured, all rejoice together with it.*

*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.*

## *Today*

There is a tiny coffee shop in San Francisco that was opened by a woman named Giulietta Carrelli. There are only four items on the menu: coffee, whole coconuts, grapefruit juice, and cinnamon toast. The name of the shop is Trouble.

The coffee shop was named Trouble because Giulietta had known more than her fair share. As a teenager, she began suffering from schizoaffective disorder. She struggled to hold a job, get a degree, or settle down in one place. She lived in nine different cities before she was thirty and wrestled with substance abuse and homelessness. During that time she often subsisted on a diet of whole coconuts and grapefruit juice.

Giulietta finally gained some stability when she met Glen, an elderly man who came to the same stretch of San Francisco beach every day. She began to visit him daily, and their friendship helped her create other areas of continuity in her life. She swam every day when she came to the beach. She made friends who looked out for her. She found a job in a coffee shop and kept it for three years, But still, she struggled to find stable housing. She was in and out of apartments and often slept in her car. One morning, her boss arrived at the coffee shop to discover that she had slept there the night before. Instead of firing her, he told her that it was time for her to open her own shop.

So with help from friends in the form of advice, money, and labor, Giulietta opened a coffee shop and called it Trouble. Each item on the menu means something to Giulietta: coffee is what she's good at after years working in coffee shops, and it brings people together for connection and conversation; coconuts and grapefruit juice represent survival for the years she lived on them, and cinnamon toast is the ultimate comfort food from her childhood. Trouble is a tiny space, and this is not by accident. Carrelli calls her little shop with its limited menu "a sociological experiment in engineering spontaneous connection between strangers." It has deliberately been set up to create such encounters. There is hardly any seating, so customers can't divide up into pairs or trios or disappear behind their laptops. As a result, those who come to Trouble end up interacting with one another, friends and strangers alike. One visitor observed

that the people there looked more like neighbors at a block party than customers at a cafe.<sup>1</sup>

I can't help but wonder if the apostle Paul founded churches out of the same motivation that led Giulietta to open Trouble Coffee. After his conversion, his encounter with the loving, living Christ, Paul seemed to know that what people need more than anything is not a philosophical or intellectual experience of love and grace, reconciliation and forgiveness, but an experiential, emotional and deeply spiritual experience of love and grace, reconciliation and forgiveness. The kind that only happens when you bring together a bunch of people made in God's image and ask them to create a place together where God's love and grace, reconciliation, and forgiveness are made manifest.

This, as far as I can tell, is what Paul had in mind for the church, and it is why the only metaphor he could think to adequately describe it was the human body, the body whose individual parts could not be more different from one another, but come together to form an extraordinary and extraordinarily capable – whole.

If you come to worship in a church these days, chances are you know something about trouble. Maybe not the kind of trouble that Giulietta Carrelli knew, maybe not the kind of trouble the apostle Paul knew, but some kind of trouble...at the very least, some awareness that things in this world and in your life are not the way they are supposed to be. Maybe the trouble you have seen has taught you that life is more than just the accumulation of wealth and titles and material things, maybe it's taught you that relationships don't usually follow the plot lines of fairy tales, maybe it's taught you that addiction is all too easy to fall into and way too hard to escape. Maybe the trouble you've seen has taught you that there is no rhyme or reason to suffering...or to joy.

There may have been a time when coming to church was simply the thing to do, and people came because everybody else came and because there wasn't much else to do on Sunday morning anyway. But that's not true anymore. You don't need to be here today, and yet, here you are. Why? Why here? Why today?

In my experience, people walk through these doors, or the doors of any church, because we are hungry. We are hungry for something we can't always put words

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<sup>1</sup> John Gravois, "A Toast Story." Pacific Standard, Jan. 13, 2014. <https://psmag.com/social-justice/toast-story-latest-artisanal-food-craze-72676>

to, but it looks an awful lot like the connections and conversations that happen over coffee and coconuts and toast at a little coffee shop called Trouble.

We are hungry for a place where people don't judge us by what they see on the outside. We are hungry to be known for who we really are and not just known for it, but loved for it. We are hungry for connection, hungry for meaningful conversation, hungry for belonging, hungry to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

Thankfully, these are all things Paul says we will find when we gather together diverse individuals who together make up the body of Christ and become a church. Paul was writing before there were church buildings or massive cathedrals or extraordinary sanctuaries like this one that takes our breath away and pulls us out of ourselves for a moment. And beauty is good, it can even be sacred, but beauty doesn't make a church. People do. We do. What Paul had in mind for the church that he compared to Christ's own body, is church as a place where we find connection, meaningful conversation, belonging, and something bigger than ourselves. But Paul also knew, from firsthand experience, that what we also find in church, because it's part and parcel of the gift of human diversity, is conflict and disagreement and anxiety about who we were and who we are and who God is calling us to be you know, trouble, just of a different sort than the trouble that might have brought us through the doors.

In today's passage from Luke, Jesus is about to get himself into trouble. He is finally ready to follow the path God has called him on, and he begins by going back to his beginnings, back to his roots to the synagogue he grew up in. He reads the scroll a familiar one that sends good vibes throughout the gathered congregation oh yes; they must have thought, this is what we are here for: To remember the prophets and do God's work of liberation and healing and sharing the good news!

If Jesus had stopped there, it might have been fine, but he doesn't, because he knows God is not calling him or the people in that synagogue just to reflect fondly on what religion might once have done or might someday do again. Jesus knows that God's call lays claim on our lives, not yesterday or tomorrow, but right here and right now. Today. Today, Jesus says, this scripture has been fulfilled.

Although we didn't hear it in our reading, what happens next is that when the people in the synagogue put together that Jesus is claiming to be God's anointed one, the Messiah, they are utterly scandalized no way! They knew this kid, they'd known him since he was in diapers and they still remembered his brooding teenage years. This was just Mary and Joseph's son!

Jesus was claiming his authority as God's anointed, but that's not all he was doing. It wasn't even the most scandalous or offensive thing he was doing. With his words, he was calling the people of that synagogue, and all God's people since, to stop living in the past or the future, to arrive fully in the present moment and God's presence in it, to recognize that the only way we can fulfill our calling As God's children, as brothers and sisters in Christ, as the body of Christ that is the church, is to show up, fully, today.

Home in the synagogue of his childhood, the words Jesus spoke asked the people of that congregation to see him as he is, today. Not as he was, the boy they knew, or even as he will be, crucified and resurrected. But as he is today, with the call and claim of God firmly on his life.

When I learned to drive, what most overwhelmed me was the windows and mirrors rear view mirrors, side view mirrors, front windshield, rear windshield. My driver's ed instructor said we would learn to check these as we drove constantly, but that we should make sure our primary focus was on the road in front of us at any given moment. We all know that you won't get anywhere at least not safely if you only look at your rear view and side view mirrors when you drive because they are not offering any information about the road ahead. Yes, they offer crucial information about where you've been, but to keep moving forward, you have to look where you're going. On that day in the synagogue, Jesus names where he is going and what kind of work he will do along the way. And he calls the gathered community to pay attention to what is happening among them right then and there today.

In a season of transition, the easiest thing in the world is to get mired in regret or sorrow for what was, or to become anxious about what will (or will not) be. Yet God is continually calling us to the present moment, which is, after all, the only moment we can ever encounter the living God and respond to God's call. Today, God's word is with us and within us, calling even us to look around

And see one another, really see one another, as a gathering of imperfect but forgiven people, each one of whom is a necessary part of this church, this body of Christ, we who are called together as one to do God's sacred work of love and justice.

The world lost a great poet this month when Mary Oliver died at the age of 83. One of the great gifts Oliver gave us was poetry that brings us into the present moment and teaches us how God's creation can help us to be present, to be here, now, today. As I have reflected on the process of leaving, Oliver's poem "When Death Comes" is what came to mind, because every change is a loss, and every loss is a death of sorts.

Oliver writes,

*When death comes like the hungry bear in autumn; when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse to buy me, and snaps the purse shut; when death comes like the measles-pox when death comes like an iceberg between the shoulder blades. I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering: what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness? And therefore I look upon everything as a brotherhood and a sisterhood, and I look upon time as no more than an idea, and I consider eternity as another possibility, And I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular, and each name a comfortable music in the mouth, tending, as all music does, toward silence, and each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth. When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms. When it's over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument. I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.<sup>2</sup>*

You are the body of Christ and individually you each play a crucial part in making that body whole. You are called by God to proclaim the good news and liberate the captives and heal the sick and broken and live today with gratitude for yesterday and hope for tomorrow and the sure and certain knowledge that with God's help. You will leave this community, this neighborhood, this world, with a little more love and grace and reconciliation and forgiveness than it had before. If nothing else, you have done this for me. I hope I have done this for you. And I hope and pray that each one of us, no matter what body of Christ we are a part of and no matter what part of that body we are, will do this for all of God's children we encounter, today, and every single day to come. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*. Beacon, 1993.