

No One Knows

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A lot happens in the receiving line after worship when clergy stand and shake hands with congregants, with you, as you depart the sanctuary. By the way, if you need or want to depart more quickly, you needn't wait. Just bypass the line.

Last week, I experienced two interesting things while greeting people after the service was over.

A child showed me a drawing they had made during the worship service of the church; how they see and experience church.

Another person, who learned about Mayflower either from the electric sign or our website, I can't remember which, said this was their first visit, and that they knew that they had found the right church. They were quietly ecstatic, a bit like someone who falls in love at first sight.

The child's picture, trying to capture church, is intriguing. How do we understand, describe, portray, this odd entity we call church?

Mayflower might have a reputation out there as a progressive, justice church, but that only captures a part of who we are.

In new member classes, and by the way there's a new one coming up in a month, we show a static organizational chart. That kind of helps. Just kind of. Thank goodness for the connector ministry that helps new people navigate this entity!

The profile we recently created to attract a new associate minister also tries to capture who we are. Go and look at the profile on the web site and notice the bubbles on pages 53, 54, 55, 56. Yes its long! The Search Team joked about animating these bubbles, making them move and interact. We meet most every week and we get a little goofy sometimes.

So...thinking of that child who showed me their picture...If *you* could summon any artistic talent, how would you portray our church?

Would it be with a symphony? Every instrument essential, some discord but mostly harmonious?

Or a tapestry with every carefully chosen thread woven throughout?

Or a sculpture? Probably an abstract and complex piece...

Or would you choreograph a dance? Maybe something like how “pedestrians walking on busy sidewalks, who without even realizing it, form a mass or a crowd that is both smooth and efficient. They give and take, at once assertive and accommodating. The scene comes alive with movement and color—people walking quickly, walking slowly, skipping up steps, weaving in and out in crossing patterns, accelerating and retarding to match the moves of others... with a beauty that is beguiling to watch... a great dance, a community moving forward” (Marty)

Or would you write a Walt Whitmanian kind of poem like I Sing the Body Electric which goes...

To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,

To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?

I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well,

All things please the soul, but these please the soul well.

As we heard earlier during the scripture reading, the church planter and nurturer Paul portrays, in prose, the church as a body. “It is a body, a wholistically functioning organism which is made up of various parts, each with its own function, a function which contributes to the life of the organism as a whole.” Robin Scroggs writes in his fabulous little volume Paul For a New Day. “And since the organism is a unity and a totality, one cannot really say that one part is more essential or important than another. Furthermore, since the organism is a totality, what happens to one organ affects all others in that totality.”

Hm... Interesting portrayal this! The church as a human body. When on occasion newcomers speak of their immediate knowing that this is the right church, their falling in love at first sight or first experience, it would seem that this *is* a body thing, this body, the church, and their body---It’s about the feelings, the warmth, the unison voice-one voice- intoning or singing, the breathing together in prayer, maybe even the odor... It’s intriguing... Others of course, take their time, weighing the pros and cons with their intellect, before determining that they want to join. That’s fine too!

So, again, how would you portray this church? What artistic medium would best capture this entity?

Last time my spouse and I were in London, we went to the Serpentine Gallery and spent a couple of hours sitting in the midst of the art of Ian Cheng. He creates computer generated imagery, animation, kind of like video games, which covers a wall floor to ceiling. It's called a computer simulation, with abstract figures moving here and there, alone and in groups across a landscape. It is an art form, not my favorite, but provocative; it is not static, but rather the images keep moving... You see the broad landscape and then it can zoom in very close to one character. It can portray the present, the past, the future. It portrays the inner relationships of all of these figures and groups. So it's dynamic ... I wonder if *this* medium, computer simulated animation, might be the best at portraying the complex and ever changing nature of church, of this church anyway.

Imagine with me, someone, probably better an outsider who could see with fresh eyes, who is both an anthropologist and a video animation artist. And they want to "portray" Mayflower church. So they do the work of observing and creating for days, weeks, months, and the day comes when they are ready to show their creation to us, about us, a giant computer simulation that covers an entire wall and takes an entire hour.

And we watch it! Everything is moving around, to the forefront, to the background... Some images represent worship but most of it is about what happens throughout the week with this community, and not just in this building, but beyond... There we see a group of figures holding signs at the capital that say 100 % clean energy MN... there a group, witnessing, on the border... There a group delivering meals on wheels... There a group tutoring at Creekside Commons... Here a choir singing strength and courage into the justice and mercy teams and singing consolation and comfort into the hearts of those in the community who are suffering... Here is a figure caring a hot dish, another one knitting a prayer shawl and another who befriends... the figures are crossing over from one group to another.... They care for one other's heart and have one other's back.... There are connections and conversations happening with figures all over this giant animation scene, hearts lighting up with each connection... There in the center, don't miss it, is a prayer group just sitting still for twenty minutes, doing nothing, the only stillness on the screen; but their hearts are lighting up and the energy emanates out to the entire entity... Now the image represents worship with a multitude of characters, and then it zeros in on one figure worshipping here, and another figure over there and another here, each one with their heart lit up. Then these figures leave the worship taking their lit up heart with them and they go in different directions, to their work in a hospital, or a school, or a company and do good and loving work there... Now we see another character, a small figure, a child or a youth, who is obviously hurting, scared, wounded, and three different adult figures, coming from different directions, care for the small figure, is that a senior friend, a confirmation mentor, a youth group leader? The small figure is strengthened, and stands up tall and moves forward into life... If we look carefully at the moving images all over the wall in front of us we see other forms, and we ask "what are those?" and the artist tells us that these are the ancestors of the church, the saints, and we see they are ever present, in worship, in the choir, in the ministries. The artist puts these forms everywhere as loving beings, zooming back

in time and then again to the present... And there are dreams portrayed, somehow you can tell it's a dream for the future... some of the figures, getting older now, are living very near one another... 20 or more of them thriving in their a co-housing dream... we see the future.... And another future dream takes shape ... a group of figures again, lovingly helping a family tend to the beloved body of a deceased family member... zooming in to the future and back to the present.... And there's more in this creative dynamic portrait of our community.... Then it ends. Phew! And the anthropologist- video artist says in closing "This is just some of it. **No one knows** everything happening in this church community."

How's that for an imaginary leap?

But how *do* we describe what *this* is? Paul uses the example of the body. How do we begin to talk about all of *this*? All of the groups, the activities, the connectivity, the hearts? It's confounding if not impossible to **portray** with any accuracy.No one knows everything that happens in this community and from this community.

What we do know is that this enterprise is less about fulfilling the needs of the individual and more about sustaining a life giving community for all. We are willing to foster the life in the other and not just for the self but for the common good.

What we also know is that we can do more, and be more together than we can be and do as individuals; that the "love generated by a spiritually coherent community is greater than the sum total of love emanating from individual members". (Marty)

And we know that though this entity is strong, it's also delicate, and so we must tend always to healthy communication, to ongoing and healthy feedback, such as this! This year finally, after years of talk, we will launch what we hope is a yearly questionnaire for everyone in our community to respond to.

And we know this that this is a tender entity, and so we must be ever forgiving... We hurt one another, unintentionally. We misunderstand one another. Because of our limitations of time and energy, we can never do enough for one another. We can only do our best. So prayers of forgiveness are ever needed... praying to God to forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us ...praying for forgiveness in the hurt we absorb from one another.

And still we know this: that no one knows the depth, the breadth, the inner connectivity of the life giving, loving effects of this, our church community.

One more time, come with me, to that imaginary space, with that dynamic computer generated animation portrait of our church. Notice how in every scene, in every drop of that creation in front of us, there is one constant, one ever present image hovering, connecting, luring, pushing, dancing...a feathery image.... in every scene and movement. "What is that?" we ask the artist. "What is that"?

The artist will say: "I'm not sure. But I always felt compelled to put it in. I just saw it everywhere in this church community. It's confounding to me. Not sure what it is. I don't know. Is it what you people call the Holy Spirit?"

Sources

Hays, Richard, First Corinthians. , Knox Press, 1997.

Marty, Peter, For Life Abundant. Edited by Dorothy Bass. Eerdmans, 2008.

Scroggs, Robin, Paul For a New Day. Fortress Press, 1977.