



A Charge for the Church of South Washington

1 Corinthians 12:14-27

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Good morning Church! It is a joy to be with you – to be gathered as the Church of South Washington – this first weekend of July.

A few weeks back, I had someone from my church ask me, “Why the Church of South Washington? ... What is it about these four churches that call us into ministry together?”

It’s a good question, and worth a bit of digging deeper to understand. I mean, realistically, there are close to 20 churches in Old Town; 9 of which are located in this South East quadrant of Old Town, south of King Street and east of Rte 1. Why – of all the combinations of churches we could have chosen to connect with in a shared ministry – why these four churches?

Part of it is location.

We are the only four churches on *South* Washington Street. Our four churches exist within 5 city blocks of each other. As the pedestrian walks, from door to door, the distance that separates our four churches is just .4 miles.

Proximity is part of our call to work together. Then, there’s our history.

Of the four churches, Roberts Memorial is the oldest – having been formed in 1832 by a group of freed and enslaved Blacks who separated from Trinity Methodist, which used to exist on the 100 block of South Washington Street. 17 years later, Washington Street Methodist was formed, also as a separation from Trinity Methodist, by a group of southern-supporting individuals. Beulah Baptist was founded in the early 1860s by freed slaves, first as a place of education, followed by the founding of the church in 1863. And Old Town Community Church was launched in 1954 in the location of its mother church, First Baptist Alexandria, when First Baptist moved to its current location on King Street.

Our churches are two Baptists and two Methodists – two historically black and two historically white – who have been divided for the entirety of our shared history, which, if you include the predecessor to Old Town Community Church, dates back to over 155 years of concurrent ministry.

Over 155 years of division – while only .4 miles stands between us.

We are four Christian Churches. We use the same Biblical text as our sacred Word. We each profess a belief in God as the Creator. We each profess a central belief in the love of Jesus Christ. We each profess a belief in the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet ... even with a shared profession of faith, we have been divided by race.

It is not our faith in God as Creator that has divided us – it is that we have not always proclaimed God’s created image on the other because of our social constructs of race and gender. It is not our faith in the love of Jesus Christ that has divided us – it is that we have not always proclaimed Jesus’ abundant life to be available to one other because of theology or identity. It is not our faith in the Holy Spirit that has divided us – it is that we have not always believed the Spirit is capable of removing the differentiations that the Biblical text says are removed among the body of Christ.

What has divided us has not been our distance, and it has not been the underlying tenants of our faith – what has divided us has been the perversion of our faith by racism. It is racism that has led us to see the gospel as restrictive – not invitational. It is racism that has led us to see the gospel as “inclusive,” and not “expansive.” It is racism that has usurped our belief and driven a wedge of division among our churches, and our community – our city, and our nation.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul lays the foundational groundwork for us to understand our identity as the body of Christ. Paul is laying out this vision for what the church *should* look like. In our shared and divided history, we – the four churches of South Washington – have failed to live in to Paul’s teaching in our Biblical foundation.

In a precursor to this text, Paul says that we are all one body in Christ, because we have been baptized into one body. There is but one Spirit that unites us into one body. And because of our baptism – because of the work of God through the Holy Spirit – we are all members of the one body. In this way of understanding, “The necessity of diversity within the body is a presupposition for Paul and therefore not something he ‘will argue for but will argue from’. The body of Christ is and needs to be diverse.”ⁱ It has been created as the Body of Christ by the Spirit in its full diversity.

In our work together as four churches, it should be named and made clear, our goal is not to merely demonstrate diversity. The diversity of the body is something that is to be expected – because we are all baptized into the one body. That is part of why this work must be done together, because, though there is some diversity in our individual churches, none of our churches individually represents the full diversity of our community. And for Paul, the diversity of the faith community is an expectation, not a hope.

As we live in to this work together – as a diverse body – Paul’s teaching guides our work.

First, we are called to acknowledge the worth, gifts, presence, and need for each and every member in the body. “The body does not consist of one member but of many.”

In thinking about what this work looks like, one of the questions that has been asked multiple times at table gatherings among the leadership of our four churches is, “what is the vision for this work together?” Do we have a road map, or an ending point, of where we hope to go in our shared ministry? I came across this quote recently from Gordon Cosby, the founding pastor of the Church of the Savior in DC. He offers, “Vision is the destroyer of the essence.”ⁱⁱ If we are so focused on the vision of where we are going, we may miss the movement of the Spirit in our midst. The reality is, our shared ministry among the Church of South Washington is work that is not replicable. There is no model for what this should look like, nor are there any easy answers for how we move in ministry together. The essence of this work is to claim a belief in Paul’s proclamation, that each member of the body should be fully functioning in their own part of the body. Until each member can function fully as they have been gifted by God, we have not lived into Paul’s vision for the church – for the Body of Christ.

If you want to know what it looks like for a person to be able to function fully in the life of the body, skim through the Gospels. You’ll find Jesus, time and again, laying witness to the new life – the abundant life – the fully-engaged life – life made possible by God’s power, that does more than just restore individual health, it heals the whole body. You’ll find people who had been outcast from the community because of physical ailments being healed so that they might reclaim their place in the community. You’ll find lepers who had been sent to live on the outskirts of town being healed that they might rejoin in the presence of the community. You’ll find individuals who had been possessed by demons, people who had been run out of town, characters who were thought to be a risk to the community, being healed – having their demons cast out – being loosed from their bonds of oppression – and you’ll read about the resulting proclamation of joy as those individuals are welcomed back into the community. Whether it’s hemorrhaging, or dropsy, or blindness, or epilepsy ... when Jesus shows up, the person is not just given medical healing. When Jesus shows up, the community is healed – the full body receives its *Shalom*. There is rejoicing, not just by the individuals, but by everyone in the room – because unless we are all free from our oppressions, are any of us really free?

And so we should ask – unless every member of the body can function as they have been gifted to function – can the body really function like the body is supposed to function? Can the church really be the church God wants the church to be, so long as any member of the church is unable to be who God has created them to be?

Going back to the text – Paul says, “the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.”” And yet, is that not part of what has divided our churches for over 150 years? Have we not said, in one way or many more to the other, “I have no need of you?” “I can do this on my own?”

In laying the framework for the church – for the Body of Christ – “[Paul] envisions not just the tolerance of differences within the community but a gracious and compassionate synergy in which all the members share one another’s sorrows and joys.”ⁱⁱⁱ Paul says, “If any one member suffers, we all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” And yet, have we not lived as if some of us could claim honor without sharing it? And have we

not lived in such a way that some have suffered at the result of our societal and theological division?

“Now, you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.”

The work we have to do as the Church of South Washington – it is not just work to live in to a better future. There is no magical reset button that allows us to start anew today, as if our historical division never existed. Systemic racism against Black and Brown People, and the resulting white privilege, began in America some 400 years ago. The systems of oppression have been maintained through our institutions of education, our policies and laws (both locally and nationally), our financial systems and housing markets, and yes, even our religious institutions – among many others.

Unless we dismantle the systems of oppression that exist – that have existed for hundreds of years – those who have been oppressed cannot live in to the fullness of their identity as members of the body of Christ. These systems continue to impact, not only our nation on the whole, but even on our claim as the Church – as the representative Body of Christ in the world today. This is a societal issue – it should drive how we engage in our community at large ... it is a church issue – it calls for us to acknowledge our corporate participation in these systems of oppression ... and it is a personal issue – we each play a role in either dismantling the systems, or allowing them to continue.

For us to claim to be the Body of Christ – for us to unite as the Church of South Washington – we must enter into holy and uncharted territory. Over the past two years, we have been blessed to share with one another in fellowship and worship. We’ve dined at the table with one another in the unexpected rainout version of a church cookout. We’ve worshiped with each other, and we’ve shared at the Lord’s table together on Holy Thursdays. We’ve spent time in the sun together, laughing as we ran around the bases of the ballfield at 4 Mile Run Park. And yet, from service – to fellowship – to worship ... we’ve just begun to form the surface level of a relational iceberg. There is so much depth below we have yet to engage. That depth will never be reached, unless we take on more intentional, more difficult, and more challenging work together. In a recent publication, author Kerry Connelly offers, “Doing the work of dismantling racism is boundary walking at its finest. It’s being willing to be uncomfortable; it’s being willing to say you’re sorry; and for the love of all that is good and holy, it’s being willing to do your own work.”^{iv} We cannot begin the work of dismantling racism if we cannot acknowledge its existence.

But this – this is the work of the Church of South Washington. Our call is not just to be friends with one another – though I am blessed to have gained some glorious friendships. ... Our call is not just to worship with one another – though I am grateful for every time we gather in the Lord’s house together (even if by video). ... Our call is not just to dine at table with another – though I am grateful for every opportunity that comes up to share a meal with each other. ... And no, our call is not even to claim victory in our diversity – though I am grateful for the abundance of gifts our diversity brings together.

Our work as the Church of South Washington is to lay claim to God’s vision of a kingdom where we are not divided by the color of our skin, or the identity of our gender, or the location of our birth, or the theological nuances of our denomination. Our work as the Church of South Washington is to lay claim to the promise of God in Jesus Christ, that we are not fully capable of being the Body of Christ, so long as any member of our God’s created is incapable of being who God has made them to be. Our work is to dive deep into self- and corporate-education, to identify how we have been complicit in the unspoken power of systemic racism. We lay claim to the promise of God in Jesus Christ that unless we are all freed from the bounds of oppression, we are all bound by oppression – for when one suffers, we all suffer; until we are all free, none of us are free.

To my siblings of faith at Beulah and Roberts – I am sorry it has taken us so long to even be willing to enjoin this conversation. You are blessed children of God, and my saying this doesn’t make it so – God has declared it in your creation. I am humbled by your willingness to share in this work together.

To my siblings of faith at OTCC and Washington Street – we have much work to do. Our histories call us to dig deep, to educate ourselves, and to acknowledge that racism is not simply a matter of sin to be forgiven, but a framework of policy and practice to be dismantled.

This is our invitation – our collective invitation as the Church of South Washington: May we share in this collective work – may we share in the Body of Christ – may we speak the truth of God’s call for justice and equality. May racism divide us no more, but may the glory of God, the witness of God in Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, lead our work as a communal body that we may not simply offer a prayer for a hopeful dream, but that we may walk hand in hand, step in step, as one body in active witness to the power of God to redeem our past, to glorify our future, and to provoke us to action that we may agents of God’s love in this world – that the Body of Christ may be as it was intended to be – with each member being able to fully live in to their created identity – that the Body of Christ – our shared identity – may live and love as God – as God’s light in the world – as God’s redemptive and reconciling power in the world. We are more than just our individuals identities – we are all part of the one, the great collective that is the Body of Christ. May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Troy Miller. *Feasting on the Word: Year 1, Volume C*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Michael Mather. *Having Nothing, Possessing Everything*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard B. Hays. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, First Corinthians*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

^{iv} Kerry Connelly. *Good White Racist*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020.