

Kenneth Crouch

Nov 2. 2008

## WHO ARE WE?

As we gather together here, Sunday after Sunday, **Who Are We?** If we ask people on the street we get a variety of answers. When we met an owner of the house we bought in Billings, he learned that I was one of the ministers at Mayflower. His eyes lit up: “Oh I know that church,” and he had words of praise for what he knew about Mayflower, although he had never been here.

Writers in the New Testament had a variety of descriptions of Who We Are.

People of the Way; God’s beloved, the saints, brothers & sisters, God’s Family.

- I. The Apostle Paul said that we are the “**body of Christ.**” He goes on to say that each one of us is important to this Body. And like what is said in the theatre, “there are no small parts.” One part of the body that does not get much positive press: **fat!** A surgeon wrote that when he operates he is amazed at how our various organs are protected by layers of fat, and how fat is a source of body energy. He went on to say that in the world most of us who live in the wealthier countries are the fat of the earth, and when it comes to us in the church, many of us could be considered the fat in the body of Christ.

In the arts these people are called “angels;” in politics “fatcats;” in the body of Christ, we are called “stewards.”

Some reflections on Mexican & Latin American people I met in Arizona. **1.** Most are Christians, mainly Catholics & Pentecostals—our brothers & sisters in the body of Christ. **2.** They are poor & looking for work to support their families. **3.** Most would rather be home with their families.

If we in America, are the fat of the world, if we American Christians are the fat in the body of Christ, these people are the “fatless.” They have so very little.

### **WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST!**

- II. Paul was the first to call this body of Christ an “**ecclesia.**” This Greek term is translated as an assembly or congregation of believers or all the believers wherever they are found in the world.

Most translators have used a different term for this assembly or congregation of the worldwide population of Christians: **CHURCH.**

Now this term is what gets us mixed up! We call the building in which we meet—the church: going to church for a board meeting. We call worship, the main thing we do here—the church: our committee will meet after church; church was cancelled! But Paul reminds us: we are the church! We cannot be canceled! In this building, or at home, at school or work, or on vacation anywhere—We are the church!

In the Tiajuana/San Diego area, these Christian neighbors from the south have no building—they do not go to a church structure—they are the church, worshipping in the open air, passing the communion elements through the fence. Because of a Dept. of Homeland Security ruling this worship will no longer be permitted as double fences have been erected separating them from each other.

### **WE ARE THE CHURCH!**

- III. Our lesson from a letter attributed to the disciple Peter is translated by J.B.

Phillips this way: “You are God’s chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation and a **peculiar people**. It is for you now to demonstrate the goodness of God who has called you out of darkness into God’s amazing light.”

When I first talked with Jane Van Dyke about coming to Billings, she told me that there were about 330 odd members—not peculiar, but odd! Now I know she meant 331, or 339! I must hasten to add that I have yet to discover any odd member!

There is a town in SW Missouri named Peculiar with a population of about some 3000 odd members. The sign as I understand it at the edge of town states that “You are now entering the town of Peculiar; may the odds be with you.”

But Peter calls us who are in the church (accdg. to JB), “a peculiar people.” Now we can name some of our Christian brothers & sisters as a little peculiar: Amish, Hutterites, Pentecostals--and it is sad the way that some people make fun of them. But as we get to know them, we know how seriously they take their faith and their membership in the church—the body of Christ.

I know that some have joined the UCC because we are a **peculiar denomination**: we were leaders in the abolition of slavery; we were 1<sup>st</sup> to ordain a woman, an African American and an openly gay man. We have stood alone on significant justice issues—at least initially—like helping tomato pickers in Florida get 2c a #, up from 1c #. We have led the way in implementing the safe church guidelines. To some—inside & outside the church—we are considered a little **peculiar**. As a congregation, Mayflower is **Peculiar** to some: we started serving communion at the beginning of worship so the children could participate—which is also peculiar to some!

But it is not only some specific denominations that may be considered “peculiar.” The Body of Christ is peculiar according to Philip’s translation.

We read in scripture how this group of Christians in the 1<sup>st</sup> century loved each other. To have that noticed gives indication that it wasn’t to be expected—they were a little **peculiar** that way! We read how when there was a famine in Palestine, all the congregations that Paul visited—even the poorest--gave offerings to help—peculiar for that time and place! (reminds me of the times that our country has had a catastrophic event like earthquake/hurricane, and congregations in the poorest areas of Africa sent offerings of assistance. A **peculiar** people with their generosity!) For 3 centuries they refused to renounce their faith, their love for Jesus—even if it meant persecution or death. **How peculiar! (This is now happening to Christians in Iraq & N. India)**

We might say that our neighbors to the south are peculiar: different language, willing to migrate to find work to send money home to their families, they worship differently from the way we do, They are also numbered with the rest of us in the body of Christ as a **peculiar people!**

### **We are a peculiar people!**

The immigration challenges, especially since Sept. 11, 2001, do not affect most of us in Montana. Our favorite foods may become scarce and/or more expensive if farmers and ranchers cannot get adequate workers. But I learned the other day from Carol Blades that we in Billings are in what is called a Border Town. We border the reservation of a significant tribe of Native Americans. As a Border Town, we have our own challenges and opportunities to minister.

In our lesson, Simon Peter goes on to say that we are called to demonstrate the “goodness of God who has called us out of darkness into God’s amazing light!” Jesus was called the ‘Light of the World’. He

said that we, too, are Light of the World. He showed God's amazing light on the prejudices that divide; on the strict religious & cultural boundaries that divided people; on the stereotypes that dehumanized.

I was reminded of the story of the CAVES by Plato. The people were afraid to leave their safe cave, fearful as to what was "out there." But finally one dared to venture out into the light, and was so amazed that it was nothing like what he had been told. He tried to persuade the others to come out, but they refused, remaining in the darkness, in their fears.

"It is for us now to demonstrate the goodness of God who has called us out of darkness into God's amazing light!" May it be so as we face the fears, prejudices, stereotypes and boundaries that divide us today! May it be so as we accept opportunities to be the living Body of Christ, to be Church, to accept being peculiar with our agenda of love, hope, faith and peace.

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