

## The Reverend Marjo Anderson

A: Pentecost 3

Ephesians 1.22-23, 4.1-3; Galatians 5.22-23a

18 June 2023  
Salem, Bridgeport

### “The Marks of the Church”

Today we're going to look at what it means to be the church, the body of Christ, and what the Spirit's role is in the church, and so I want to share with you 3 brief scripture texts:

In Ephesians 1:22-23, Paul writes:

*“... [God] put all things under [Christ's] feet and set him as head over the church, which is his body....”*

In Ephesians 4:1-3, he writes:

*“I beg you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called,  
    <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,  
    <sup>3</sup> making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace....”*

And finally, in Galatians 5:22-23, he writes:

*“<sup>22</sup> ... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, & self-control....”*

Now we all know I think that the church is the body of Christ.

Obviously, it would be ludicrous to take that image of the body literally as if it meant Christ's physical body.

And yet, this isn't mere metaphor; it isn't just symbolism.

We are Christ body in a very real sense – not in a physical sense, but in a spiritual sense.

And spiritual things, the spiritual realm, the world of the spirit is every bit as real as the physical world.

If anything, it is more real than the physical world.

The Church is a spiritual reality and yet it exists in a physical world.

That means it includes physical people and physical buildings.

The part of the Church that exists in the physical realm as a human institution or organization, is just like any other human institution or organization.

But because the true nature of the Church is spiritual, the church is different from every other human organization.

I want you to imagine, if you will two human bodies – over here, imagine a dead body; and over here, imagine a live body.

They look pretty much the same right? But obviously there is a difference.

The dead body is not alive.

It's not breathing, its heart is not beating, the neurons in the brain are not firing,  
    the blood is not flowing to and from the heart to bring life to all of the cells in the body.

It can't see or hear or feel or smell or taste or move.

And as much as we might want to make it a live, we can't. Because we can't bring life to something; only God can.

Over here we have a live body.

It's breathing, its heart is beating, the neurons in the brain are firing,  
    the blood is flowing, and it can see and hear and feel and smell and taste and move.

We are not able to give that body life; what gives that body life is the Spirit of the living God.

That's the difference between a human organization and the church.

A human organization is just an entity that is not alive; but the church, the body of Christ, is very much alive.

And what gives it life is the spirit of the living God.

Human beings can set up a human organization and call it a church, but if the Spirit is not animating it, it remains nothing but a human organization that calls itself a church.

But when the Spirit *does* animate that human organization called a church, then it truly is the Church and the living body of Christ.

So how do you know if a church is alive or dead?

How do you know if it's just a human organization or if it is part of the living body of Christ?

Let me give you 4 ways to tell....

1. If a congregation is truly part of the Body of Christ, all of its parts, all of its members, will be following the head, which is Jesus.

That means that all parts will be working together and not against each other.

It means that the parts will be working in a coordinated fashion,  
and all going in the same direction, and not in different directions.

That's how a healthy body works.

2. If a congregation is truly part of the Body of Christ, it will be growing because Jesus said that as long as we are attached to the vine, we have life, and if we do not have life, it means that we are no longer attached to the vine.

The signs of life in a congregation cannot be judged merely by numbers used in human organizations like membership, or attendance, or giving.

The crucial signs of life in a congregation are those of spiritual growth –  
an increase in love of God as demonstrated in time spent

in worship, in prayer, in Bible study, and in witnessing to who God is and what God has done.

Only when individual members are growing spiritually can the congregation itself grow in numbers.

A congregation not growing in numbers is not growing spiritually.

3. If a congregation is truly part of the body of Christ, it will be alive in the Spirit.

And a church that is alive in the Spirit will have certain characteristics.

And perhaps the two clearest indicators are unity and peace.

We've already talked about unity, because if we are all following Jesus,

then we will all be working together and going in the same direction.

If we're not all going in the same direction,

it means that some or all of the members of the body are not following Jesus.

That's what Paul means when he says when he calls us to make

*"every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."*

If we are not exhibiting humility and gentleness, if we are not exercising patience,

if we are not treating each and every member with respect and compassion and love,

if we are not in unity, if we are not at peace, then we are not listening to God.

If we are exhibiting arrogance & pride, if we are acting in ways that are intimidating or coercive,

if we are dismissing peoples' thoughts and feelings,

if we are making them feel as if their opinions don't matter, then we are not listening to God.

And if we are not listening to God, then we need to start doing that before we dare do anything else.

Well, there are many, many, more ways to tell the difference between a congregation that is simply a human organization, and one that is truly the body of Christ, but we will just look at one more today.

4. If a congregation is truly part of the body of Christ, its members will be growing spiritually.

They will be growing in their love for God, and this will show up in the time they spend  
worshiping and praying and studying God's word.

And it will also show up in how well their spiritual garden is growing.

And by that I'm talking about the fruits of the spirit –

love & joy, peace & patience, faithfulness & goodness, kindness & gentleness, & self-control

I'm going to talk briefly about each one of these, so that it's clear what is fruits really are.

LOVE. The Greek word for love is agape. It's the love that God has for us.  
It's the love that Paul talks about in the 13th chapter of first Corinthians, when he says,  
*"If I give away all my possessions...so I might boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.  
Love is patient; love is kind; love is not...arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way....  
It does not rejoice about injustice, but rejoices, whenever the truth wins out.  
Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always helpful, & endures every circumstance."*  
Love seeks the welfare of others above its own desires.  
Love is humble enough not to presume it knows what is best for another.  
When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of love.

JOY. The Greek word is chara (KAHrah), meaning joy, gladness, or delight  
It's not the same thing as happiness since happiness depends on what is "happening" in the external reality of one's life.  
Joy, on the other hand, is based on an internal spiritual reality that allows one to transcend the present situation.  
It arises from a fundamental acceptance of and confidence in the will of God.  
It springs up when we both trust and obey God.  
When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of joy.

PEACE. The Greek word for peace is eirene (eyeRAYnay).  
It's the equivalent of the Hebrew word shalom, which means not only peace,  
but wholeness, soundness, health, well-being, and prosperity.  
It's a state of tranquility, rest, and contentment  
that fosters harmony between a person & God, between individuals, & within a community.  
It arises from confidence and trust in God despite what one is facing.  
And it comes from praying, studying God's Word, and submitting to God's will.  
Paradoxically, it is a God-given state that through love is wide enough to preserve unity while embracing diversity.  
When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of peace.

PATIENCE. The Greek word for patience is makrothymia (mahcrotheeMEEuh).  
It means endurance, constancy, steadfastness, perseverance, forbearance, fortitude, and long-suffering.  
Patience allows us to choose not to act, even when we have the power to do so.  
Patience allows us to wait on the Lord, to wait for God to act, to acknowledge that God's timetable is not ours.  
Patience is a given to us by God as we wait for the Spirit  
to bring order out of chaos, harmony out of dissension, and unity out of division.  
When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of patience.

KINDNESS. The Greek word for kindness is chrestotes (chreeSTOtays)  
Kindness springs from moral goodness and integrity and excellence in character.  
Kindness is NOT harsh or austere or severe or sharp-edged; it is not quick to cut someone off.  
Rather, kindness is grace-filled and delights in contributing to the happiness of others.  
It is a quality shown in the way a person speaks and acts; it is more volitional than emotional.  
When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of kindness.

GOODNESS. The Greek word for goodness is agathosyne (ahgathoSOOnay).  
Goodness is not a human work, but arises from one's submission to the will of God.  
Goodness means simply doing as God would have us do.  
Sometimes this means confronting lies with truth, or taking a stand against injustice.  
Such goodness demands honesty and trustworthiness in motive as well as conduct.  
When not confronting lies or injustice, goodness actively seeks to make others feel at ease,  
shows respect for the personal dignity of others, avoids blunt speech and an abrupt manner  
and does not belittle or degrade others.  
Such goodness has no manipulative qualities in it.  
When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of goodness.

FAITHFULNESS. The Greek word for faithfulness is pistis (PEEStees).

This faithfulness is not faithfulness to any theology or tradition or principle, but to God and God alone.

Faithfulness is not intellectual assent to a theory or philosophical or theological proposition;

it is not an idea in the mind, but a fervent conviction in the heart and soul

that causes us to rely on God instead of on our own wisdom, knowledge, or common sense.

In other words, if the Spirit is completing his work in our lives & we are allowing him to control us,

we will have a growing faith that God is who he says he is and will do what he says he will do.

This faithfulness makes us willing to do anything that God desires, no matter what the cost.

When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of faithfulness.

GENTLENESS. The Greek word for gentleness is prautes (PROWootays).

Well, this word is translated gentleness or sometimes meekness,

those words miss the strength that is inherent in the Greek word.

Prautes is a word that was used to describe the goal of horse training,

which was to break a wild horse and train it to be completely submissive to its rider

so it obeys every command of its rider without hesitation

and so it is so in touch with its riders' intentions that the horse and rider function as a single unit.

Gentleness means that instead of going our own way and doing what we want or what we think is best,

we must be completely submissive and obedient to God.

Gentleness develops when one has both a humble opinion of oneself,

and the inner strength to control one's emotions, tongue, and behavior.

When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of gentleness.

SELF CONTROL. The Greek word for self-control is enkrateia (ENgrateeh).

Self-control means the ability to put one's own desires aside, and instead focus on God's desire.

Self-control is achieved when one is no longer controlled by one's own passions, but is free to follow the will of God.

And we are all following the will of God, there will be no room for pride, arrogance, intimidation,

bullying, coercion, manipulation, fear mongering, sarcasm, disrespect, dismissing, or belittling.

When we are all following the will of God, we will be able to set aside our own egos and agendas

as we patiently wait to discern God's will –

which will become apparent when his spirit has created unity in the bond of peace.

When you are looking and listening for the Spirit, look and listen for this kind of self-control.

So as I close let me quickly recap

A congregation can simply exist in the physical world as a mere human organization.

OR it can look like a human organization in the physical world,

but actually exist in a spiritual realm as the Body of Christ, animated by the Spirit.

If a congregation is truly part of the Body of Christ, then the following will be true:

1. All of its parts, all of its members, will be following the head, which is Jesus.
2. The congregation, as a whole, will be growing spiritually.
3. The Spirit will have created unity in the bond of peace.
4. The individual members of the congregation will be growing spiritually and the fruits of the Spirit will be evident to all.

What God wants to see from this congregation is unity and peace.

What God wants to see from each and every member are the fruits of the Spirit –

love & joy, peace & patience, faithfulness & goodness, kindness & gentleness, & self-control.

As we seek to discern God's will for us today,

listen for the voices of love & joy, peace & patience, faithfulness & goodness, kindness & gentleness, & self-control,  
and look for the ideas that will bring unity and peace.

This is my prayer for each and every one of you, and for all of us together here at Salem. Amen