

I,
 like many others,
 am a youtube junky.
 One of my favorite pastimes is to do video searches.
 Of cute kitties,
 baby elephants,
 ferocious football hits,
 and basically every Seinfeld clip.
 Over the past two weeks or so,
 one video that caught my attention was titled,
 "Why I hate religion, but love Jesus."
 The video was made by a 22 year old guy from Seattle,
 who put together a poem with heart thumping music.
 In his poem,
 he told us that He loves Jesus,
 but he believes that institutional religion is a bad thing.
 Within twelve hours of posting the video on youtube,
 it had received over a thousand hits.
 A week later,
 the video had been viewed over 14 million times!
 Several of my friends had posted the video on Facebook,
 and several news outlets started running stories about the video.
 In a matter of days, however,
 responses began to appear on youtube.
 Videos entitled,
 "Why I love Religion, and I love Jesus;"
 or,
 "Why I dislike your poem, but I love Jesus,"
 and the complete reversal,
 "Why I hate religion, and Jesus too."
 The notion that God hates institutional religion tends to be a popular sentiment these days.
 Another thing I often hear is,
 "I am spiritual, but not religious."
 It's the idea that one can have communion with God on their own:
 it's the sort of mentality that says, "it's me and Jesus, and I can talk to Jesus any time, and the
 church is made by man so I don't need institutional religion."
 Over the past several months I have heard these different claims dozens of times.
 But here's the thing:
 What happens if God doesn't hate institutional religion?
 What if, in fact,
 He has actually chosen the church -- and therefore formal religion -- to be the vehicle in which
 people come to know Him?
 Clearly the church has done some awful things.
 There have been wars in the name of Christ;
 that's a problem.

A minority, but loud, breakaway group of Christians has made a habit of picketing soldiers' funerals;
 that's a problem.
 There have been vicious attacks on the gay community;
 that's a problem.
 Certain men have misunderstood the Bible to say that it's okay to abuse and belittle women;
 that's a problem.
 But the church has also done things that are Godly, salvific, awe- inspiring, and just plain brilliant.
 It is the church that has for thousands of years fed the hungry,
 given to the poor,
 and nursed the sick.
 It was the church that said that --
 man or woman,
 black or white,
 American or Mexican --
 all are equal in the eyes of God.
 It is the church that gives people hope when it appears that there is none.
 It was the church that led the charge in abolishing slavery,
 and it is the church that preaches the good news of Jesus Christ.
 It is trendy and easy to bash on God's church,
 because, as I said before, it has --
 and continues to sometimes do --
 things that are thoughtless and hurtful.
 But that's not because there is something wrong with "the church," itself;
 rather, the problem lies with individuals.
 As St. Augustine once said,
 "The problem with the church,
 is that it's full of people."
 Augustine also said,
 "The church is a prostitute,
 but it's my mother."
 Not only does Jesus not hate the church,
 but HE LOVES IT even with all its flaws and blemishes!
 Christ loved the church so much that he bought it with His own blood.
 The bible calls the church,
 "the bride of Christ."
 What if someone came up to you and started criticizing your wife or husband?
 What if they said, "she's manipulative and mean," or, "boy is he UGLY!"
 I would hope we wouldn't stand for that that!
 The bible also says that the church is "the body of Christ."
 After Christ rose from the dead and ascended into heaven,
 we,
 the church,
 have taken on the material body of God.
 That's right,

the bible states that you and I,
are God's material in the world today.
Wow!

Do you realize how amazing that is?
The Holy Scriptures says that when I look at all of you,
and hopefully when you look at me,
we see Christ.

Not only does this apply to us here at St. Paul's, but to our Diocese, and all Christian churches.
We are all various parts of the body of Christ.

Therefore, the apostle Paul states that when one member of the body is attacked or injured,
Jesus Himself is attacked,
and each of us feels that pain, too.

We are called to look out for one another.
To love and care for each other,
no matter what!

It means that we are to forgive someone when they have wronged us, even if they haven't said
they're sorry yet!

It also means that, if and when we wrong someone,
whether we intended to hurt them or not,
we must apologize and ask for forgiveness.

It means we're not supposed to talk smack about one another.

It means we're not supposed to gossip.

Can I tell you something?

God despises when we talk about each other!

I mean despises.

Whether what we say is true or false,
and even if we're right and they were wrong,
God hates it!

Why?

Because you might as well be talking smack about HIM!

Remember,

WE are God's bride...each and everyone of us.

In our epistle today,

this is what St. Paul is addressing to the church at Corinth.

(what, gossip? hurting each other? what is this?)

Throughout the Roman Empire,
animals were sacrificed to pagan gods at feasts and public occasions.

Part of each offering was used in a ceremonial meal or went to the donor;
the remainder was often sold in public meat markets.

Christians had a dilemma on their hands.

Should they eat meat that had been offered before idols?

Jews had prohibitions,
but Christians believed that an idol has no value.

Thus, food sacrificed to an idol was, in essence, sacrificed to a dead rock.

Paul answers they are correct in principle.

However, he says that they must think about other people's consciences.

Love of God and of fellow Christian compels Paul not to eat such meat.

Another translation of this passage, from a version of the Bible called *The Message*, puts it this way:

Paul writes,

“God does care when you use your freedom carelessly, in a way that leads a Christian who is still vulnerable to those old associations to be thrown off track.

For instance, say you flaunt your freedom by going to a banquet thrown in honor of idols, where the main course is meat sacrificed to idols.

Isn't there great danger if someone still struggling over this issue, someone who looks up to you as knowledgeable and mature, sees you go into that banquet?

The danger is that he will become terribly confused - maybe even to the point of getting mixed up himself, in what his conscience tells him is wrong.

Christ gave up his life for that person.

Wouldn't you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him?

Because, as you say, it doesn't really make any difference?

But it does make a difference if you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin!

When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ.

A free meal here and there isn't worth it at the cost of even one of these "weak ones."

So, never go to these idol-tainted meals if there's any chance it will trip up one of your brothers or sisters.”

In other words,

here's the best way to understand what it means to be in the church:

It's not about you!

And, lest you think I'm preaching AT you, that goes for me, too.

It's not about me, either.

We have a tendency in our culture to be so consumed with our own desires, our own plans,

and our own preferences,

that we sometimes forget that being a member of the body of Christ means laying down our selves,

for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When its not about me,

when I stop being selfish,

it means its about you.

This means that I must sacrifice myself, for each of you,

and you all are called to lay down your lives for one another.

And not only are we called to lay down our lives for each other, but we are also to do it for the rest of the world.

The former archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said this,

“The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”

You and I get nothing for going into the world and preaching the gospel and bringing people to know Jesus Christ.

We do that because its what we are supposed to do.

We love each other here in St. Paul's, and those in the world, for God has commanded us to, when He first loved us.

We must remember this anytime that we are thinking of talking about one of our brothers and sisters,

or we do something malicious to one another.

We ARE the body of Christ here at St. Paul's,

as well as in Kinderhook,

Colombia County,

New York,

The United States,

and in the world.

We aren't just the body of Christ for two hours on Sunday;

it doesn't stop when we leave our church buildings.

When we leave this place, and proceed to gossip about our fellow brothers and sisters here, or about anyone for that matter,

we are hurting the body of Christ.

Could you imagine what would happen if we actually acted as if we were the body of Christ?

What a testimony to the rest of the world which is broken and hurting.

May we be willing to stop imagining and start doing.

Amen.