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*Romans 13:8-14*  
*17 Pentecost / Year A / Proper 18*  
*7 September 2008*  
*Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” exhorts the Apostle Paul. What in the world do you think this means? What was Paul trying to tell those persecuted few in Rome; what is he trying to tell you and me? The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, “The body of Christ takes up space. That is the body of Christ makes footprints.”<sup>i</sup> // Christianity is an incarnational religion. “The mystery of the incarnation, simply stated, is the mystery of God taking on human flesh and dealing with human beings in a visible, tangible way.”<sup>ii</sup> However it is a mistake to understand the incarnation only as a one-time event that occurred over the period of 33 years some 2000 years ago in the person of Jesus. “To use the past tense to talk about the incarnation would be a mistake. The incarnation is still going on and it is just as real and as radically physical as when Jesus of Nazareth, in the flesh, walked the dirt roads of Palestine.”<sup>iii</sup> Now you say, how can this be? I think you know where I am going with this. “We [you and I] are the body of Christ. This is not an exaggeration, nor a metaphor.... Scripture, and Paul in particular, never tells us that the body of believers *replaces* Christ’s body, nor that it *represents* Christ’s body, nor even that it is Christ’s *mystical* body. It says simply: “We *are* Christ’s body....The body of believers,...is the Body of Christ in an

organic way. It is not a corporation, but a body; not just a mystical reality, but a physical one; and not something that represents Christ, but something that [actually] is him.”<sup>iv</sup>

When I was in college I was part of a para-church movement called Intersivity Christian Fellowship. We were one of many para-church groups on campus, but we were known as perhaps the most progressive of the bunch. During the first few Reagan years when the Christian Right was just getting ramped up, the members of Intersivity weren’t afraid to occupy a more moderate place on the political and theological spectrum. At any rate, once a week or so, a group of us would get together and go to one of the local bars to imbibe in some adult refreshment. Every week the conversation was pretty much the same, we would sit around our beer or wine or whatever and we would talk about what Jesus was doing in our lives, what he was teaching us and showing us. It was good stuff, but the conversation wasn’t the highlight. The highlight came at the end of our fellowship time when we would pray for one another out loud in the midst of the assembly of bar patrons. If you don’t think we got some looks, let me tell you. Most of the people around us were seriously uncomfortable with the body of Christ coming into the midst of their bar scene. We loved it, we believed then, and I still believe, that we were the body of Christ in the flesh in those places at that time.

In his earthly ministry, Jesus intruded into people's homes. He showed up at a wedding and caused a scene. He came into places of death, where people hardly knew him, and he brought forth unexpected life. You see, Christianity is not at its core a "spiritual" religion, it is an incarnational religion. And this has immense implications, for you and me and for our world. You and I, as Theresa of Avila put it, are the physical hands, feet, mouthpiece, and heart of Christ in this world; it is us, the community, who mediate Christ to the world. As God once acted through Christ, so he now acts through those who are conformed to the image of Christ. And because God does have a body that takes up space, God cannot not remain ethereal and vague, distant and detached. In his body, God becomes a fact, an undeniable fact that must be dealt with and encountered, must be either acknowledged and followed, or ignored and denied.<sup>9</sup>

How are we conformed to the image of Christ or in other words, how do we put on Christ? Paul makes it quite clear, we love. That's right, we love, not just the lovely, the kind hearted, those who are easy; no, we love any and all who cross our path even those we simply detest. As you and I put on Christ, we mediate this love through our flesh, through our senses. When we offer an ear to someone who is hurting and in pain, we become Christ in the flesh in that moment to that person. When we sit in silence with our arms around someone who has just lost a loved one we become Christ in the flesh to that person. When we provide a shoulder to

cry on or shed tears of empathy with someone who is lost or confused, we become Christ in the flesh to that person. When we laugh and play with our own children or the neighborhood kids we become Christ in the flesh to them. When we speak words of encouragement to those who need to know that someone understands or words of admonition to those who are on the path to destruction, we are being Christ in the flesh to those people.

Like it or not, you and I are Christ's flesh and bones and skin in the world. Are we frail and broken? Yes we are, but we are not alone. We have the Holy Spirit with us, we have the Sacred Scriptures and the Eucharist and we have one another to help us conform to the image of Christ. But ultimately what it comes down to is a decision. You and I have to decide for ourselves that we are going to put on Christ. You and I have to decide that we are going to invest ourselves in the lives of others, to go all in. We have to trust that by being Christ in the flesh to a broken world our ears and arms and hands and mouth and feet and heart will in fact change eternity for everyone who comes across our path.

In Jesus Name.

Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Quoted from a sermon by the Reverend Barbara Lundblad on the “Day One,” radio broadcast, May 2005

<sup>ii</sup> Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, Doubleday, New York, NY: 1999. pp. 76

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. pp. 80

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. Lundblad