

# **A Reflection on Confirmation Sunday:** ***How Beautiful Is the Body of Christ***

**1 Corinthians 12**

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On Sunday, January 14<sup>th</sup> we began our 2018 Confirmation Class. The class had 18 students, and the students were joined midway through the eight week class by their mentors, 18 adults from our church community who came alongside the youth to help them as they developed their faith statements. Our class actually began the week before on Sunday, January 7<sup>th</sup>, when I had the youth and their parents to our house for an introduction night that included a pizza party. There was a buzz in the air as so many people gathered together. Some of the youth seemed to be there at the urging of their parents, and yet somehow by the end of that first night, I had the sense the group was going to come together and we would see God doing some amazing things.

On that first lesson with the class on January 14<sup>th</sup>, our curriculum instructed us not only to read the passage before us today, the one about the Body of Christ that is found in I Corinthians 12, but we were also instructed to draw the outline of a human body to give the students a visual display. I began the class with the outline of a human body as the curriculum instructed. But before talking about the Body of Christ, I told the group about another image of a body a friend once described for me.

The man who told me about this other image of a body was born in India. He was born back in the day when the caste system in India held sway in that culture. One time as we talked he drew a picture of a body, much like the one before our class that morning. He then described how within the system different castes function as particular parts of the body. The priest and academics are the mouth. The kings and warriors are the arms. The business community is the thighs. The servants and the subordinates are the feet. I was of two minds when I described the caste system to our youth. I was hopeful they could relate to this hierarchical system, as that seems to be the way school and other activities function for young people. At the same time I was also fearful that they could relate to this hierarchical system. My fear was that some of them knew exactly how it felt to be at the bottom.

But what I really wanted to share with them was a part of the caste system that is not described in the body that I mentioned. You see, as I sat with my friend years ago and he described how the caste system is like a body, he then drew a space for another group that was not included in the body. He drew a space for a group of people called the untouchables. The untouchables, simply by virtue of who they were born to, were outside the caste system. They were literally outcasts. They didn't belong. There was no place for them. My friend, born and raised in India, looked me in the eye and told me something that was painful to hear. He told me he was born an outcast. He was born as an untouchable.

Back in June of 2003 National Geographic did a piece on the Untouchables of India. The article began with these words. "Branded as impure from the moment of birth, one out of six Indians lives-and suffers-at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. They are Untouchable." The first page shows a little girl wandering the streets, with the caption telling us her only means of raising money is washing polluted clothes, clothes filled with blood and human waste. Two women are pictured doing hard work loading thousands of bricks for \$2.00 a day. A man is shown rising out of a sewer, covered in human excrement. His job is unclogging drains. Two men bear scars that disfigure their body and faces, scars that came when acid was thrown on them. Their crime? They fished in a pond used by upper caste members.

I wanted our youth to see a system, depicted in a body, where people were excluded. There were not only ones who were at the bottom of the heap, there were people who were cast out completely. I looked at the faces of these 18 students and my hope, my heart's desire was that they would know there is another body, a body where people are not cast out but included, a body where people are not ranked in a hierarchical system where some are at the top and some are stuck at the bottom, but instead a body where all the parts are equal, and important, and necessary, and valued. I wanted our youth to know about the Body of Christ.

The friend who told me of his life as an Untouchable is named Philip Prasad. Philip was able to escape the caste system. The Presbyterian Church established a school in India. Philip was able to attend the school. He received an education. Philip Prasad came to the United States where he graduated from college. Upon graduation he began a successful career in city management. Through it all he never forgot his upbringing as an outcast in India. And he never gave up on a desire to help those who continue to live as untouchables. So he formed an organization called Witnessing Ministries for Christ, a ministry that has brought help to more than a million untouchables. Witnessing Ministries for Christ helps untouchables get jobs. They form cooperatives around fishing and farming. They form small businesses. They provide education for children. Education is a critical part of moving out of the caste system. Education opens doors of opportunity.

Most importantly, Witnessing Ministries for Christ witnesses to these untouchables about Jesus Christ. Witnessing Ministries tells about a God who sent his One and Only Son to save this world, to show God's love for all the children of this world, to welcome the least, the last, and the lost. Witnessing Ministries literally draws a body on a piece of paper and shows untouchables a body they can belong to, a body where they can have a place they call home.

When these Untouchables are presented with the good news of the gospel, a marvelous transformation occurs in their lives. Paul wrote to the Romans that he was not ashamed of the gospel because it was the power of God for salvation to all who believe, first the Jew and then the Gentile. The Apostle Paul had a broad and inclusive view of salvation. I think Paul would have surely rejoiced to hear that even the Untouchables are receiving God's mercy.

One of the truly awful things Philip Prasad tells about is the names that are given to untouchable children. It is bad enough they are born as outcasts, but their names seem to seal that shame. Children are forced to have names like Dung, Stupid, or Idiot. Can you imagine how degrading that would be? And can you imagine what a joyful blessing it would be when an untouchable is baptized and given a new name? Julie traveled with Philip Prasad to India. While there she witnessed something she said was one of the most amazing demonstrations of the new life that is given through Jesus Christ. She attended a baptism while with Witnessing Ministries on a trip to India. The old person was put under the waters, symbolizing their identification with the death of Christ. Their old self was put to death. Then they were raised up, also in identification with Christ, who was raised to new life. As a sign and seal of their new life, they were given new names. Dung, Stupid, Idiot, became John, Peter, Mary and Sarah. Then the congregation sang:

***I will change your name. You shall no longer be called wounded, outcast, lonely or afraid.***

***I will change your name. Your new name shall be confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one, faithfulness, friend of God, one who seeks my face.***

With our Confirmation Class we first drew a body where people were in not only a hierarchical system, some at the top and some at the bottom, but a system where some were completely cut off and cast out. Then we drew another body. We drew the Body of Christ. We drew a picture of a Body where people belonged and had a place and were honored and valued. On that day as we talked about the Body of Christ we also talked about baptism. When we are baptized in Christ Jesus we are greeted with the good news that there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. Our differences melt away. We all are one. We all belong. We all are loved.

During our lesson on baptism the students were presented with this main idea.

“Your baptism marks your entrance into this family of God, and is the beginning of your lifelong journey.”

They were asked and answered a question from the Study Catechism published by the Presbyterian Church USA.

“How do you live by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?

“I am not my own. I have been bought with a price. The Lord Jesus Christ loved me and gave himself for me. I entrust myself completely to his care, giving thanks each day for his wonderful goodness.”

And they were given the following scripture to connect the lesson for them.

“The life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me.” Galatians 2:20

To the members of the Confirmation Class of 2018, I say that you belong to the Body of Jesus Christ. You have been bought with a great price. You were bought at that great price because God loves you, each one of you, just like God loves all of his children. In the kingdom of God, the kingdom where Jesus is Lord, no one is untouchable. No one is an outcast. No one is less than someone else. We are all precious in his sight. You, each and every one of you, are precious in God’s sight.

Friends, this good news is not only for the members of the Confirmation Class of 2018. The gift is for all of us. As our Confirmation Class stands before you, as they are introduced, by name, with the promise of God’s everlasting love filling and surrounding and blessing and protecting them, please hear the good news. God knows your name. God has a place for you. For each of you. For each of us. For all of us. May we all come to the place where we can say with confidence and with joy:

“I am not my own. I have been bought with a price. The Lord Jesus Christ loved me and gave himself for me. I entrust myself completely to his care, giving thanks each day for his wonderful goodness.”