

**Sunday, July 2, 2023**  
**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)**

Matthew 10.40-42

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/139876715790130>

*(Sermon begins at about 19:50)*

**“Our Identity as the Body of Christ”**

Most of you know that I grew up in a military family. Or as I am fond of saying, “I spent the first 16 years of my life in the Marine Corps.” Which is not far from the truth. There is a joke in the Marine Corps—at least there was when my father was in—that if a Marine were meant to have a wife or children, they would be issued to him. A not-so-subtle implication that it was not only the life of the Marine who belonged to the Corps. The life of his family—referred to as dependents—also belonged to the Marine Corps. We, as family, as dependents, were not only dependent on our father, but also dependent on the Corps. Almost to the point of the line between Marine and dependent being seemingly indistinguishable. To this end, one of the major things that was instilled in dependents—wife and children alike—was that what you do reflects on the Marine. That if you did something wrong, or bad, or disgraceful, that poor judgement or behavior reflected on the Marine. The implication being that such infractions or indiscretions demonstrate the inability of the Marine to “control” his dependents. That this reflected on his poor parenting abilities. That this called into question his ability to lead others Marines. I don’t know if that was actually the case—would not surprise me if it was—but in a world where every action is observed and under scrutiny with an eye toward future promotions in rank, that indiscretions or poor judgment on the part of a dependent could have a bearing on a Marine’s future. Even if not the actual case, that was certainly the impression that was drilled into us as Marine dependents. What this boils down to, at its essence, is that the identity of the dependent is not strictly their own, but inextricably linked to, even defined by, that of the Marine.

Or put another way, I recall hearing on more than one occasion, from my father’s lips, as well as those of other Marines, a question that left no doubt about the focus of identity. When inquiring as to who’s child you are, who your parent is, it was not uncommon to be asked, “who do you belong to?” A not-so-subtle perpetuation of this idea that the identity of the dependent was, well, dependent, on that of the Marine. That one’s identity was not truly their own.

Jesus’ words that we just heard in our Gospel reading are perhaps the Christian equivalent. “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.” Jesus is speaking to his twelve apostles in an ongoing discourse on mission and ministry that we have been exploring the last couple of weeks. He is seeking to convey that by virtue of them being his followers, and him commissioning them to act in his name and on his behalf, they are, by definition, entering into communion with him. And by extension, communion with the One who sent him—God. The model for this relationship between the disciples and Jesus, this communion, being the relationship that Jesus has with God. But it is even deeper and more significant than mere relationship. The apostle’s identity is inextricably

linked to Jesus' identity. It is this relationship between follower and Jesus that defines who the follower is at an existential level. That the identity derived from relationship with Jesus and with God takes precedence over one's own identity.

As Christians, this is essentially understood to be the starting point for our own our relationship with Jesus and with God. One that is reflected in the imagery used in our rite of baptism—of dying to self and being raised to new life in Christ Jesus. That in the act of baptism, we are taking on a new identity. Of course, for us Christians this is all sort of a “no-brainer,” as it were. And yet, something that we probably need to be reminded of from time to time. Along with being reminded of what this identity with and in Christ means in our lives as members of his Body in the world.

When we engage in ministry in Jesus' name, we are, whether we realize it or not, actively entering into communion with him. Something that can be easy to forget. We can become so focused on doing, doing, doing, that we fail to realize the implications of what we are doing. That ministry is not just something we are doing ourselves. It is a function of the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is not just some nice image that the Apostle Paul came up with to describe the collective membership of the Church. It is so much more than that. The Body of Christ is precisely that: the present earthly body of our Lord. The Body our Lord uses to achieve his purposes in the world. And that would be us. As members of the Body of Christ, engaged in ministry in the name of Christ, this is not about us. It is an entering into a sacred union and communion with him, acting on his behalf. Being his body for the purposes of engaging in this particular task. While we may be physically engaged in the work, it is really Christ that is doing the work. Working in us and through us. We, and the ministry itself, the ministry we are engaged in, becomes an embodiment of Christ's spirit, of his identity, of his very being, in a tangible, physical way. As one commentator notes, “Jesus' *being* or *presence* or *body*—'the Body of Christ'—is constituted by his mission. If someone carrying out that embodied mission is welcomed, then Jesus is effectively welcomed as well, as is the One who sent him.”<sup>1</sup>

What this says is that the Body of Christ is most fully realized, is most fully living into who it is called to be, when we are engaged in ministry on Jesus' behalf. That it is not sufficient to just refer to ourselves as the Body of Christ if we are not going to actually do what Christ is about—living the Gospel. Think of it this way. Someone can go to school and become a doctor. But if they never practice medicine a day in their life, are they really a doctor? Maybe in name, but in actuality? Not so much.

But it is not just about Christ's identity being reflected in us. We, in turn, reflect something of Christ's identity in what we do. By intimately participating in the work of Jesus and of God, our identities overlap. What we do, we do in the name of Jesus and of God. Not that we are Jesus or God, obviously. But we are called to be co-creators with them in ministry. What we do is in the name of Christ and the name of God. What we do reflects something of who Christ and who God are. Those who receive the benefits of the ministry we engage in on behalf of Christ, are able to feel the love of Christ through us. That they have been blessed by Christ working through us. In that moment, it is not us reaching out and touching another. It is Christ, working in us and through us, reaching out to the other. Your hand touching the hand of the other becomes Christ's hand embracing the other in love.

That is the real work of the Gospel. That is the real work of Christ. That is the real work of God. And since our identities are intimately and inextricably linked with them, that is our real work in the world, as well. That is sacred and holy work. More sacred than anything we can possibly do in this room on a Sunday morning.

Yes, our worship is important. It is about us praising God. It is about us learning more deeply who we are as God's people, who we are as the Body of Christ. It is about us learning how to more deeply live into what that means for us as individuals and as a parish community. It is about supporting one another in our individual and collective ministries. And most importantly, it is about being fed, through the Liturgy of the Word and through the Eucharist—fed mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and even physically—to strengthen us for the real work we are called to do. Because the most important thing we do is not about us being the Body of Christ together, to one another in this place. It is about being the Body of Christ out there in the world. It is about living into our identity as the Body of Christ in a broken and hurting world so in need of hearing the Good News of God's love. Not just hearing the Good News, but also experiencing it. Because the only way people in need of God's love are going to experience it firsthand is through what we do. Through how we choose to live into and demonstrate that love in real and meaningful ways. Through how we choose to live into our true identity as beloved children of God, called to a special and unique identity as the Body of Christ in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> "All the Families of the Earth: SALT's Commentary for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost," SALT, June 26, 2023. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2023/6/26/all-the-families-of-the-earth-salts-commentary-on-fifth-sunday-after-pentecost>.