

As I was doing some reading the other day I was reminded of the seeming contradiction that lies at the heart of our common life – I mean, by that, the two identities that we think are co-terminal – that mean the same thing – but which actually don't mean the same thing. Those two things are summed up by two different ways of describing the Church, the gathered community of Christians. They're both biblical – at least, they both have biblical roots. The word "Church" comes from the Greek: *Kuriakon*, meaning "The Lord's House."

The two ways of describing "Church" are: "Institution," and "Body of Christ."

When the first – Institution – is used, it essentially means "the whole body of Christian believers; Christendom." (Collins Dictionary).

The second - the Body of Christ – is more obviously biblical – it's the way St. Paul describes that same gathering of believers that defines "Church."

The confusing thing for us is that while they might appear to be talking about the same thing they're very much not – at least not in our day and age.

“

The reality should be – from my perspective, at least – that the Institutional Church's only reason for existing is to protect the Body of Christ, to provide support for the Body of Christ, and always to take second place to the Body of Christ – it should be (to use a metaphor I adopted nearly forty years ago) like a mantle thrown over the Body's shoulders for protection and warmth.

Without the Institutional Church at its best, the Body lacks the structures and support needed to provide context, shape, and direction.

Without the Body the Institutional Church becomes a mere shell, irrelevant and purposeless.

Church" has come to be heavily overlaid with another word: institution. The Institutional Church can all too easily be over-structured, rule-bound, hierarchical, unequal, indifferent, cold, monolithic, and, ultimately, irrelevant to our ordinary, everyday lives.

The Body of Christ, on the other hand, is, in its purest form, unstructured, organic, relational, about matters of the heart, warm and compassionate, non-judgmental, diverse, equal.

Our struggle as Christians is to make sure that the Institution doesn't try and take over the Body, and also to make sure that the Body doesn't reject the valuable institutional support structures that can help promote and direct the body's energy for the most important of our Christian goals: to share in Christ's ministry of reconciliation and love in our fractured, angry world. The Institution serves the Body, the Body respects the Institution.

At its core, one of the greatest dangers inherent in institutional Christianity – a danger that undercuts what it means to be a part of the Body – is privilege – in part because that's one of the greatest dangers – greatest threats – to all human community.

When the response to “Black Lives Matter” is to say “well, yes, *all* lives matter” you can be guaranteed that it was said by someone in a privileged position, someone from the dominant culture. George Orwell must be laughing in his grave, and re-writing his famous final lines from *Animal Farm* – you remember: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” This one would be: “All lives matter, but some lives matter more than others.”

The issue at the heart of both our Epistle and Gospel today is the issue of privilege – in James the privilege of wealth over poverty, in Mark the privilege of a dominant culture – Judaism – over a sub-dominant culture – that of the Syrophenician woman.

The Letter of James presents us with a vision of faithfulness to God in which we demonstrate our fidelity by reflecting God’s character in our human lives. And the most obvious example of “reflecting God’s character,” James says, is our action on behalf of “widows and orphans,” which is a code phrase for everyone in need, for everyone for whom God has shown particular care.

“That’s all very well in theory,” says James, “but let’s look at what actually happens in your congregations.” You treat the elegantly-dressed man (literally someone “gold-fingered and in radiant clothing” ) as more special than the homeless beggar in filthy rags.

It does not take an advanced degree in theology to tell that such behavior doesn’t go well with what James has put forward as God’s way: “*religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is ... to care for orphans and widows in their distress*” (James 1:27). And by the same token, he says, “*God [has] chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom*” (2:5). James recognizes the temptation to favor people like us, or whom we wish we were, over against people whose affliction reminds us of how contingent our good fortune may be.

What we are living then, James says, is the half-hearted discipleship that submits to desire: the desire to be comfortable, the desire to be upwardly mobile, the desire to experience only life’s ups, and to be insulated from life’s downs. And so we seek to secure our well-being at the expense of others, regardless of their own contingent circumstances. Sometimes that’s how the institution works. By contrast, whole-hearted faithfulness to God will always require of us whole-hearted faithfulness to the least of Jesus’ brothers and sisters: to orphans and widows, to our naked, hungry neighbors, to wounded and broken left-behind bystanders. Hopefully, that’s how the Body functions, or seeks to function, with the royal law of love, with integrity and compassion, not out of selfishness and privilege.

When we live out of our identity as the Body of Christ, we learn that such living involves more than affirming theological formulas; it requires a thorough reorientation of our lives. Faith makes a difference in us. And faith makes a difference in our relations with our sisters and brothers: We live as the Body of Christ, with the support of the Church, not the other way around.

The gospel makes a similar point, and authentically so – you can bet this is a historical story – no one is going to make up a story that makes Jesus look bad! And this story makes Jesus look bad – certainly less than charitable. He dismisses and insults. This “dog-woman” is no cute little puppy,

Jesus calls her a bitch. Here Jesus seems unsure of the relationship between the Gentiles and the Kingdom of God. Are they in? Or is the kingdom only for the privileged? Jesus himself is, here, among those characters in the Gospel of Mark not fully living into the reality of what the Kingdom of God is like. Jesus suddenly seems reticent to distribute God's kingdom to a woman who is a gentile. He opts instead for an epithet.

When Mark talks about the Kingdom in his gospel it's always as a direct contrast with earthly kingdoms. We often miss that, so we're surprised by what we find. The seeds that are God's kingdom are cast indiscriminately (Mark 4:1-20); God's kingdom sprouts up without cultivation (Mark 4:26-29); it appears insignificant but becomes monumental (Mark 4:30-32). Those expected to perceive God's kingdom properly turn out to be ignorant, slow, and hard of heart (Mark 4:35-41; Mark 6:52). God's kingdom plays by nobody's rules but God's, breaking into the world in the least likely of places, like howling demoniacs, bleeding women, and dead little girls. **WHATEVER YOUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GOD'S KINGDOM, JETTISON THEM**, Mark says!! It's not about privilege; it's not about being part of the dominant culture, it's not about being first in the institution, it's about the radical unity-in-diversity, the radical equality of God. **IN GOD'S KINGDOM, THERE ARE MARRIAGE LICENSES FOR ALL**, even for recalcitrant County Clerks like Kim Davis!

Here, in this story, God is actively breaking into the world in a way that doesn't conform to the norms of human institutions, doesn't respect dominant culture and the privilege that goes with it. And why are we surprised when we realize that?!! That's the way God always works!

That was then, this is now. And Mark is asking us now what he was asking his readers then: whose are the marginalized voices today who are speaking truth to power? Where might God be active in a way that our power structures are unable to control or domesticate? How can we make ourselves a part of that active, God driven change? How can we live as the Body with the institution's support, not it's opposition? *To answer these questions we have to ask those who are marginalized from the white, male power structures of our nation and our own Episcopal Church, where 90% of all bishops and 70% of all rectors and vicars are white men, while Episcopal white men are decidedly in the minority.*

The bible is much more than a set of texts to be read, it's a place where we encounter ourselves, a place that calls into question the way we live our lives. And it's an invitation to embrace the difference between institution and body, to use the former to support the latter, and then, to paraphrase James, to "get out there and do something to change the world for good."