

The Deep End of the Pool¹
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1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21
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The lections for Epiphany invite us to open our eyes anew to *God's appearance* with us—which as you may know, is what the word *epiphany* means. Just look, they seem to say, at what happens when God shows up: Jesus is baptized and God is there, naming and claiming him as Beloved Child. Jesus makes wine at a wedding feast and we notice God with us in the Beloved Community, as we gather to share our praise and our struggles and in our dispersal to bring caring and hope to the wider world. Today, on this third Sunday in Epiphany, the good news is that *God is present in our relatedness with one another in the Beloved Community.*

Paul's depiction of the diverse members of the body carrying out their specialized functions, yet somehow functioning as a greater whole, is a splendid image for us to contemplate as we prepare to enter into holy discernment of who we are and where God is calling us. The job titles for the members of the body have shifted since Paul's time, but we appreciate how at First and St. Stephen's some are called to do Christian education, some to make music, some to do pastoral care, some to manage the finances and assets, some to brood over the welfare of the congregation, some to do hands-on mission through Supper Club and our other outreach ministries. This body is blessed with wonderfully diverse membership, yet you work and pray and serve as one body.

As one entrusted with the care of this body during your pastoral interim, I would like to name something I am sensing and hearing: this body is a little bit worried about its future. You are a healthy congregation, yet you are small in numbers, and that causes anxiety. Concern is not completely unfounded, because we know that some churches in the city have closed and sold their buildings. On Sunday mornings the 25 to 50 people gathered here in this serene, spacious sanctuary look around and think how *nice* it would be if there were more of us. Similar thoughts have arisen as we have recruited leaders for the present year and formed the search committee. Your love for this church is palpable, and many of you are doing more than one crucial job. But the truth is we're stretched a little thin. We are grateful for the grace that allows us to keep things going, to keep up our mission commitments, to pay the heating bill and fix the latest leak in the roof. But there is that nagging question: *How long can we keep this up? We need more members. We need to grow.*

All of us have been so thoroughly indoctrinated by our culture to believe *size matters* that we can't help suspecting that a bigger church is a better church and that more numbers must correlate with God's favor. Yet the median church in the United States has 75 people in worship on a Sunday morning. The majority of American Christians belong to small or medium size churches. We seem to prefer it that way, and that may be an

important clue. Still, being children of our time, we can't help casting envious glances at the mega-church that has 5000 members and offers a dazzling smorgasbord of programs.

My granddaughter Ava loves swimming, so our outings together often include finding opportunities to go to a pool. One time we went to an indoor pool in a big recreation center, and long before you got there, you could hear the sounds of excited children. Inside the building, the din of children of all ages shrieking and splashing and shouting was deafening.

After a little while, I noticed something: all that noise was coming from the shallow end of the pool. The only sound coming from the deep end was the quieter splashing of experienced swimmers swimming laps with discipline and confidence. There was no yelling, no crying, no complaining coming from that end.

The church in our time is something like a swimming pool: it's deeper in some places than in others. My experience in ministry has led me to conclude that most of the noise comes from the shallow end of the pool, from those who haven't learned to swim with confidence or are not secure enough to venture into the deep water.

The reality is that many churches have gotten big by going into show business. It's easy to draw a crowd if that's what you want to do. But it's tough to build a congregation. One pastor of a large church said, with tongue in cheek, "Our people are deeply committed in every area except three: lifestyle, mindset, and values. Other than that, they are deeply committed to the Gospel."

It is very tempting to make growth an end in itself. And if you just want more people to fill up the pews, you can probably find a way to do that. My husband Philip was engaged in university chaplaincy for many years, usually with a small core group of faithful students. He sometimes joked that if your goal is to have lots of people, all you have to do is serve free beer in the parking lot and they will come.

Philip was always looking for ways to demonstrate what campus ministry had to offer students, but it wasn't easy. The campus of North Carolina State had a large open area that served as a thoroughfare and gathering place. It was called The Brickyard. It was where organizations would set up information tables or students met with friends between classes. There was a loud, self-appointed evangelist called "The Brickyard Preacher" who used to wave his Bible and harangue students, especially the females, whose manner of dress he declared immodest. Philip wanted to demonstrate a different side of Christian faith, so he decided to show up at The Brickyard at lunchtime with the portable a-frame sign they used at the campus ministry and two canvas chairs. He would set up the sign and the two chairs a little distance away from the Brickyard Preacher. He (bearded, wearing his clerical collar and jeans) would sit in one chair and greet students as they passed by. If someone stopped for a moment, he invited them to sit in the other chair and talk. The message was: *We are here for relationship. Not to judge you, not to control your mind, but to invite you into relationship.*

Christian community is about relationship. That's what we have to offer. We specialize in relationship with one another through the Spirit, and together we learn how to swim in the deep end of our faith. Jesus used another metaphor for depth of relationship when, during the last week of his life, he said to his disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). To deepen into fruitfulness, we have to live in relationship with Christ and with one another.

I believe that relationship is the strength of this community. You may have come to this church in the first place because it proudly proclaims that it is Open and Affirming or because you live in the neighborhood or because someone invited you. But no matter what got you into the pool, you have stayed because of Christ-centered, Spirit-led relationship and the opportunity to deepen it. You are learning to swim in the deep end of the pool.

Whenever I go swimming with Ava, we play mostly in the shallow end because she is still a novice swimmer. She carefully checks the depth to make sure it's not over her head. But she also is fascinated with the deep end of the pool. She sometimes asks me to tow her toward the deep end or she holds onto the edge and inches along toward the enticing deep water. Ava knows her limits, but she is learning bit by bit to go deeper. The deeper water calls to her and she knows she is made for the deep end of the pool.

I believe that you are people who are heeding an inner prompting to swim in the deep end of the pool. I also know that the community around us has many, many people who are hungry for relationship with their own spiritual depths. They may initially be attracted to the loud, splashy things going on in the shallow end, but over the long haul, they probably aren't going to find the real relatedness they crave. Some of those seekers will find their way to *this* church if we find ways to let them know that we are here and that we are here *for them*.

If you remember to reach out for relationship beyond these walls as you continue to grow in spiritual depth, it is likely that the church will also grow in numbers. As we launch into the search process, let us not be seduced by fears about dwindling financial resources or simply look for more people to fill out the choir or the committees. God's Beloved children are destined for relationship, for swimming in the depths of divine reality. If we trust in relatedness and are faithful to it, we will be led where we need to go.

¹ Some material adapted from a sermon by The Rev. Dr. William L. Self, CBF, Johns Creek Baptist Church, Alpharetta, GA.