

Alan Baughcum

Sermon: "...we, who are many, are one body in Christ..."

Reverend Dr. Alan Baughcum

St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio

August 23, 2026

Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-8

In the U. S. we believe in equality before the law ... we did not always believe that ... ask a woman or a person with black, red, or yellow skin ... ask a gay or a lesbian. We have not always been equal before the law but over our history we have moved hugely in that direction. Early in our history you had to be a white male of a certain age who owned property in order to vote or hold public office ... no longer ... but the expansion of the voting franchise and the widening of opportunities to hold public office are just small samples of the ways in which we have moved towards equality under the law. Good for us!

The ancient Egyptians did not believe in equality before the law. The Pharaoh was the law and, well, he was the Pharaoh. He had more rights and more power and more wealth than anyone else. Everyone else was VALUED only to the extent that they could assist the Pharaoh or add to his power and wealth. They could be *de-valued* if they were seen as troublemakers or, as in the case of the descendants of Joseph and his brothers, potential troublemakers for the Pharaoh.

And the new Pharaoh saw the farmers and shepherds descended from Jacob living in the land of Goshen as aliens and potential rebels. The land of Goshen was in the eastern part of the Nile River delta, near the border with Canaan. Perhaps that was part of why the Pharaoh was concerned. He must have been very concerned about threats to his rule because he took away the property rights promised them by an earlier Pharaoh and made them work on his projects rather than theirs.

Same thing in the Roman Empire. At the time of Paul's writing, the Roman Emperor held the power. Others were valued depending on whether they could serve the Emperor in some way or devalued because they might make trouble for the Emperor.

By the time of Jesus, the Jews had been around long enough to create a little social and political space in the Roman culture in which to move. The Romans respected institutions and religions that were old. They even exempted Jews from serving in the military because each Roman Legion of soldiers had its own god ... no Jew would allow themselves to be or appear to be in service to any god other than Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Alan Baughcum

Christians were not nearly so acceptable. They were new and unknown. They ate the body and blood of Christ in their worship services and were alleged therefore to be cannibals. They greeted one another with a holy kiss or other signs of fellowship and so were suspected of sexual deviancy. And, worst of all, they were new ... they had no history ... they might be some weird cult from the East, from Asia ... dangerous! Or, at least, potentially dangerous.

The Scriptures this morning tell us several things. They tell us that if we worship the true God of Israel, Yahweh, we are seen as odd and that may be a problem for the prevailing culture. That's what happened to the Hebrews of ancient Egypt. They were different. They did not worship the Egyptian gods, they worshiped a different God, unknown to most Egyptians and certainly unknown to the Pharaoh. And if the Pharaoh fancied himself a god, the Hebrews were definitely not a part of that particular denomination. Indeed, they cried out to their God for help, for salvation. God raised up a leader who literally separated them from the Egyptian culture, leading them into desert lands where there was no competing culture.

Same thing with the followers of Jesus in Paul's time. Not only did they worship Yahweh, but they also had the temerity to assert that Jesus was the son of that God and worthy of worship. New and unknown gods gave the Romans heartburn.

Worshiping Jesus certainly gave religious Jews problems. How could one assert that there was one and only one God of the universe and then contradict that "oneness" by worshiping another god, Jesus formerly of Nazareth, and now recognized by people gathering in churches also as God? In addition to the larger Roman culture, Christians increasingly found themselves an awkward fit in the Jewish culture.

So, first lesson: if we find ourselves extremely comfortable and all warm and fuzzy in our culture, we are off base. Christians are always counter cultural. It does not matter what the culture is. Christians worship someone who is not worshiped by that culture. Oh, the culture may claim to be Christian as we used to do in the U. S. and in Western Europe. But scratch the surface and those cultures were lifting values like success, power, and fame above Yahweh and Jesus. Those were not the values Jesus preached.

Because we adhere to the values Jesus preached, Christians always stand over and against the prevailing culture. Sometimes we are different in small ways, sometimes in big ways.

Look again at the first two verses in our reading from Chapter 12 of Romans. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be

Alan Baughcum

conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul has yet to travel to Rome and he does not know the members of the churches there. He therefore tells them in advance of his coming that he is empowered by God, “on the basis of God’s mercy.” That means that he is qualified to speak to them about their shared faith as an authentic spokesman for God.

Paul tells them “... do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed ...” Do not give in to the prevailing culture. It is not a culture suitable for the followers of Jesus. For followers of Jesus the only “good and acceptable and perfect” culture is one directed by the will of God.

How are the followers of Jesus then to behave? Well, when it comes to worship, they are to present their entire bodies as a living sacrifice to God. When Paul speaks of the body, he is speaking as a traditional Jew to followers of Jesus, who at this point are almost all Jews. In Judaism the body is a whole ... w h o l e ... flesh, mind, spirit, soul ... all the same thing, the body. We are to deny God nothing but devote all our humanness to the worship of God.

And that is how we Christians are counter cultural. God is our highest allegiance. Nothing else is higher, no matter the culture we inhabit.

Second lesson: we identify ourselves as part of the body of Christ. Together we are the body of Christ in this world. Christ is our culture. Yahweh is our highest value.

How does that work? Well, we acknowledge that we are different from one another. Paul recognizes that in his metaphor. Some of us are like the arm, some like the leg, and so on. But we all depend on one another and need one another, just as the various parts of the body need and depend on one another.

Paul lists the various and necessary parts of the church. In his time that included prophets, ministers, teachers, exhorters, givers, leaders, and compassionate caregivers and encouragers. The institution of the church today is a more complicated structure than it was then. We employ doctors, therapists, accountants, administrators, IT specialists and on and on. Still, we are all part of the church, we are all part of the body of Christ.

If we are all parts of the body of Christ, how are we to behave towards one another? Should we imagine that one of us is more important because some jobs are supposed to be more important than others? No.

Alan Baughcum

One of the reasons I became a minister was because I tired of ministers (preachers) who over time gradually developed a certain unctuous way of being with parishioners. Sometimes they were just pompous jerks but more often they just had a certain air about them. It was as if they felt that their ministry was something they was deigning to do because he was so much more important than everybody else in the church. It was often just a subtle way of a minister being in the church. But it was one that grated on me.

Being a minister is a job to which God calls us. (Sometimes in difficult circumstances it is the congregation who decides that a member needs to be the minister, whether that person feels chosen by God or not.) A minister is supposed to preach and teach the word of God and properly administer the sacraments. That is pretty much it. We have added a lot of other items to the job description because the church needs someone to do those other jobs and often will not or cannot afford to pay additional staff to do them.

But all of that does not make the minister more important than anyone else in the church.

The minister is not the only one who can develop an inflated view of their importance. I have seen churches where the church secretary is the power and exercises it almost in the same way that a Pharoah does. I've seen the same thing with Music Directors or with Sunday School teachers or church moderators. Those are jobs and they are important jobs and God may have called people to do those jobs. But they do not make the Christian in that job any more important than anyone else in the body of Christ.

Final lesson from today's scriptures: what matters is not the job. What matters is the grace given by God to the person doing the job and the faith of that person. Both the grace and the faith come from God, and we cannot to claim to be their source. Rather we can only acknowledge the vastness of our debt to God for those gifts. We acknowledge that debt through the jobs we undertake in service to God and in service to God's Creation.

Let us pray: Dearest Lord, teach us to put you first. Help us resist the temptation to get too comfortable in our culture and forget to seek the culture of the body of Christ. Teach us to be grateful for the grace you have given us. Teach us to be grateful for the faith you bestow on each of us. Help us not to focus so much on status of the work to which you call us and focus instead on the service we can undertake on your behalf. Move us from self-satisfaction in status towards humble appreciation of the accomplishments that the body of Christ achieve, with its members lovingly and respectfully working together. Steer us clear of jealousy and envy. Direct our paths instead to your path of love and peace and justice.

Amen.

Alan Baughcum