This is from Frederick Buechner’s book *Peculiar Treasures*, in his article about Paul:

When you came right down to it, what was God up to, for God's sweet sake, sending them all out—prophets, apostles, evangelists, teachers, the whole tattered bunch—to beat their gums and work themselves into an early grave?

God was making a body for Christ, Paul said. Christ didn't have a regular body any more so God was making him one out of anybody he could find who looked as if he might just possibly do. He was using other people's hands to be Christ's hands and other people's feet to be Christ's feet, and when there was some place where Christ was needed in a hurry and needed bad, he put the finger on some maybe-not-all-that-innocent bystander and got him to go and be Christ in that place himself for lack of anybody better.

And how long was the whole great circus to last? Paul said, why, until we all become *human beings* at last, until we all "attain to mature manhood," as he put it; and then, since there had been only one really *human*being since the world began, until we all make it to where we're like him, he said—"to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-13). Christs to each other, Christs to God. All of us. Finally. It was just as easy, and just as hard, as that.

It doesn’t get a lot better than that, in my opinion. I couldn’t lay my hands on my own copy of *Peculiar Treasures*, so I can’t say what else Buechner wrote about Paul in this article.

By the way, I’ll just make this declaration now: I used to feel a bit guilty about poaching Buechner’s words, or Bill Loader’s, or Barbara Brown Taylor’s, but I’m about to get over that. For one thing, I always give them credit. For another, if my preaching amounts to nothing more than putting these scholars and writers—and a bunch of others—in front of as many parishes I’ve served, congregations to whom I’ve preached, then I feel that I’ve done something of service. As I’ve told you before, I long since resolved that if someone else says something perfectly, or as close to that as humans get, then why should I pretend that I can do better?

I was saying that I don’t remember what else Buechner says about Paul, but it here he describes Paul as the not-so-innocent-bystander, who did in fact stand on the sidelines while Christians were being stoned to death for being . . . well, Christians. And God used Paul as a mouthpiece at times, a social witness, even though he was sometimes blustery, sometimes misogynistic, impulsive . . . it’s beginning to sound like faint praise, isn’t it? And I don’t mean for it to.

What I love is what Buechner says, that God can use any one of us at any time to fill a role in carrying the good news to a needy and hungry and impoverished world.

And, just to be clear, that impoverishment of spirit can and does happen even in the richest nations in the world and, for that matter, among the richest within that nation.

In fact, Paul, the less-than-innocent bystander, became the author of some of the most soaring prose enshrined in what we deem to be Holy Scripture. I would place today’s passage in that category, this beautiful description of how seemingly insignificant and yet how vital each of us is in the grand scheme of things, this Body of Christ.

By the way, I always think about the “less honorable” parts of the body, and the people we associate with those parts, sometimes being less eloquent and more specific in referring to these . . . people. Anyone who has had a colonoscopy or the need for one, knows just how vital those less honorable parts are.

But I digress.

This description and analogy of all of us together making up one body is the Church in a few words.

Another of Paul’s most eloquent pieces—the top of my list of his greatest hits—is the very next bit in First Corinthians, following his lead-in and cliff hanger closing words of today’s passage, “But strive for the greater gifts.” Tune in next week to hear about those.

Back to today, and the body of Christ. We need each other, and the world (even those parts of the world that don’t understand it) needs us, at least our harmonious acting together, to answer humanity’s most difficult problems. We’re not the only ones who can do those things, of course, but we together provide one potent response to the world’s most crying needs.

In today’s gospel Jesus tells his audience, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And so it is now, with all of us flawed humans together acting as the body of Christ: “Today, God’s promise is being fulfilled within and through us.” + + +