that redemption. We live in the truth that, however slowly or quickly we may be traveling, we are going somewhere. Or, more accurately, somewhere (and Someone) is drawing near to us.

Redemption is crashing into our little stretch of the universe, bit by bit, day by day, mile by coming mile. We have hope because our Lord has promised that he is preparing a place for us. We are waiting, but we will make it home.

9

calling a friend

congregation and community

After dinner, dishes, and the arduous process of putting the kids to bed, everything starts to quiet down, and I call my friend Rebekka. I leave a message, a long rambling message about highs and lows of my week. She will call back. And she'll express sympathy and talk about her day or share a disappointment or tell me how her studio opening went.

Rebekka is what Madeline L'Engle called a "friend of my right hand."[1] She's the kind of friend—one of just a handful—whose life has become so bundled up with mine that I can't make sense of me without her. She knows me, good and bad. We share a passion for beauty, butter, and urban design, and an indulgence for chips and TV, which we enjoyed together every Wednesday night when we lived on the same street. We love each other.

Two years ago I moved states and, to our great sadness, we had to say goodbye. So we visit. And in the meantime we call, in our spare minutes, in our going out and coming in.

My calls to Rebekka have become a sort of confessional booth, a place I go to spill out struggles, worries, failures, and doubts, and to celebrate hopes, joys, and successes, to ask for prayer or how to make better bone broth.

Rebekka is a professional artist. She finds beauty in everything—even in me. Her delight in me gives me hope that in my murky, mixed-up soul there remains a burning loveliness that only God could have placed there, and that he is cultivating. For years now, she and I, together with other close friends, have grappled with the gospel in the warp and woof of our daily lives. She helps me to believe.

I like the parts of the worship service when we talk to each other. In historic liturgy this happens most often through the responsive reading of the Scriptures and responsive prayers. In my church we read the Psalms responsively every week. Instead of just one person reading to everyone else (a good practice in its own right), we read together, in turns. Back and forth, we share the same sacred sentences. As we join together in responsive prayer or reading, I look at the faces in the congregation: some rapt, some bored, some pained, many weary. We made it through another week. We are being the church, speaking words of life to each other, showing up for each other. Again.

But this back and forth is not only directed toward one another. In antiphon, we are talking to God together—praying in agreement, even in the very same words. As Rev. Canon Mary Maggard Hays explains, "We aren't just conversing with each other when we recite the Psalms antiphonally or responsively. We are talking to God, too. Reminding one another and God of his promises and our

complaints. We are witnessing one another's cries for help and reminding God that we are in this together."[2]

Often the more charismatic and energetic traditions have a time of call and response, when the congregation and the preacher interact with each other, building a sermon together with "Amens" and "Hallelujahs."

Christian friendships are call-and-response friendships. We tell each other over and over, back and forth, the truth of who we are and who God is. Over dinner and on walks, dropping off soup when someone is sick, and in prayer over the phone, we speak the good news to each other. And we become good news to every other.

My best friendships are with people who are willing to get in the muck with me, who see me as I am, and who speak to me of our hope in Christ in the midst of it. These friends' lives become a sermon to me. I don't mean that we give each other pat answers or cheap pep talks—few things are worse than receiving a neat little packaged sermon after we've poured out our fears or embarrassments to someone. Instead, we hold up the experiences of our lives to the Word of truth.

The Psalms that we speak responsively to each other every Sunday don't offer easy answers. They run the gamut from triumphant praise to deepest depression. They let us be as complex as we actually are. Christian friends are like this. They call to us and respond with us when we say "O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name!" (Ps 8:1), and when we say, "O LORD, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?" (Ps 88:14).

My friendship with Rebekka has become, quite literally, a friendship of call and response.

We call. We leave messages.

We call back.

We respond.

This call and response is the rhythm of good friendship, of life together, of the community of saints.

For a couple of centuries now, evangelicals have focused almost exclusively on a personal relationship with God, on individual conversion and spiritual growth. Many feel that the church (if it's necessary at all) is primarily intended to serve our individual spiritual needs or to group us together with like-minded people—a kind of holy fraternity.

If we believe that church is merely a voluntary society of people with shared values, then it is entirely optional. If the church helps you with your personal relationship with God, great; if not, I know a great brunch place that's open on Sunday.

But while an individual relationship with Jesus is an important part of the Christian life, it is not the sum total of the Christian life. Our relationship with God is never less than an intimate relationship with Christ, but it is always more than that. Christians throughout history—Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox alike—have confessed that it is impossible to have a relationship with Christ outside of a vital relationship with the church, Christ's body and bride. In his *Institutes*, John Calvin quotes Cyprian's famous dictum (drawing on Paul's language in Galatians 4) that "He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother."[3]

When we confess in the Nicene Creed that we believe in "one holy, catholic, apostolic church," we are confessing that we cannot know Christ on our own, or merely with a small cadre of our

friends. Instead, we rely on the global, historic church that Christ initiated and built. When we worship Jesus, we rely on millions of Christians over thousands of years whom God has used to bear witness to himself. The only reason we know anything at all about Jesus is because his disciples told their friends, neighbors, and enemies about him, the apostles preached and wrote down his teaching and stories about him, and believers have carried his message everywhere they've gone in each generation. The Bible names this process *paradosis*—the faithful handing down of the gospel, a process that is always embodied and that happens in real time with real people (1 Cor 11:2; 2 Thess 2:15).

My relationship with Rebekka is not merely relational: two friends who love God and each other. It is institutional, and it is wrapped in ritual. We are both baptized. We are co-communicants. For five years Rebekka and I took communion together each Sunday.

We have a relationship of "call and response" with all believers the world over and throughout time. Beautifully and mysteriously, the community Rebekka and I share is not simply with each other. It is with all of the church.

We are in this together.

Thomas, the priest at the church Rebekka and I used to attend together, often asked us to imagine the communion table stretching on for miles, to remind us that when we take Communion, we mysteriously feast with all those who are in Christ.[4] In the Eucharist we commune with Dorothy Day and Saint Augustine, the apostle Paul and Billy Graham, Flannery O'Connor and my own grandmother. One day we will all feast together, in the flesh, with Christ himself.

Hopefully Rebekka and I will be seated near each other, and near the butter.

We profoundly need each other. We are immersed in the Christian life together. There is no merely private faith—everything we are and do as individuals affects the church community.

Yet many believers of my generation are not sure what the church is for. Some have denigrated the need for it all together. We have produced a me-centered faith that would be foreign to most Christians throughout history. We have made a false gospel with individualized communion-on-the-go kits. A popular Christian author can write that "most of the influential Christian leaders I know (who are not pastors) do not attend church," and can refer to the church as a university that he has "graduated" from.[5]

But if Christianity is not only about my individual connection with God, but is instead about God calling, forming, saving, and redeeming a people, then the church can never be relegated to "elective" status. Christ did not send his Holy Spirit only to individuals. He did not merely seek personal relationships with his followers. The good news is not simply that I can believe and thus make it to heaven, or even that I can believe and live out my life among a band of Christian friends.

Jesus sent his Spirit to a people. The preservation of our faith and the endurance of the saints is not an individual promise; it is a promise that God will redeem and preserve his church—a people, a community, an organism, an institution—generation after generation, and that even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury in the mid-twentieth century, wrote, "We do not know the whole fact of Christ

incarnate unless we know his church, and its life as part of his own life. . . . The Body is the fullness of Christ, and the history of the Church and the lives of the saints are acts in the biography of the Messiah."[6] We do not know this Messiah solely through the red letters in the gospel texts. We know him in his fullness because we are joined to him in his Body, the church. In this joining, we do not lose our individuality or our individual stories of conversion and encounter with Christ. Instead, our own small stories are wrapped up in the story of all believers throughout time, which are together part of the eternal story of Christ.

Yet Christ's bride and body, which will one day be spotless and whole, is currently blemished and broken.

There is, of course, the plain fact of institutional disunity in the church. I have another "friend of my right hand," Faith. She was in my wedding, and I was in hers. Faith is Catholic and, though we love and respect each other deeply, we do not commune together. In our friendship we bear and mourn the fractures in Christ's body.

And beyond the grim reality of institutional disunity, many of us bear scars from fractured relationships or institutional sin in the church.

Rebekka and I have encountered brokenness in our friendship. We've hurt each other. We've had to have long, hard talks. She's been gracious enough to be willing to have them. We've forgiven each other.

There are times, though, when the wounds the church gives are even more profound and complex than conflicts between individuals, as painful as they can be. Sin in the church can be insidious and systemic. We can be injured by a misuse of power or entrenched

institutional pathology. Any of us who have hung around the church long enough have a few scars to show.

I was once deeply wounded by someone in a position of power in my church. Suddenly, a place that had always been a refuge for me became a place of rejection and condemnation. The pain of that hurt felt sharp, even physical, a blow that knocked the breath out of me. I was tempted to give up on the church altogether. I felt that everywhere I looked, left and right, I saw ecclesial dysfunction and brokenness. I was becoming cynical and guarded.

Yet where else could I go? The church was where I heard the gospel in community, where I received nourishment in Word and sacrament, where I touched the body of Christ, where I was shaped and formed as one beloved by God. So we returned to church, albeit a different congregation, after a lot of prayer and talks with close friends and mentors. Our new pastor, who knew our story and struggle, called us "the walking wounded." I received the Word and sacrament, most often with tears, among people I was no longer sure I could trust. Yet believers around us loved us and prayed for us. The church itself nursed us slowly and patiently back to health. Brothers and sisters, our co-communicants, met us in our pain, spoke words of life and hope over us, and dared us to trust again.

Many have suffered far worse than me at the hands of the church. The church throughout history has been the world's leader in showing compassion for the poor, suffering, and rejected. It has brought us wonders of architecture, modern medicine, art, and higher education. Yet the church has also been a place of scandal and violence—child abuse, religious wars, racism, and bigotry—all manner of evil. Flannery O'Connor said, "You have to suffer as much from the church as for it. . . . The only thing that makes the

church endurable is that somehow it is the body of Christ, and on this we are fed."[7]

I take hope in what the church will one day become—that we, despite our sin, failure, and pain, will one day be made beautiful and new. Yet our task is not simply to dwell on what the church will one day be, but to face what she currently is squarely and honestly, and to seek Christ in and through the body of Christ. Ramsey challenges us:

> Before Christians can say things about what the church ought to be, their first need is to say what the Church is, here and now amid its own failures and the questionings of the bewildered. Looking at it now, with its inconsistencies and perversions and its want of perfection, we must ask what is the real meaning of it just as it is. As the eye gazes upon it, it sees the Passion of Jesus Christ; but the eye of faith sees further: it sees the power of Almighty God.[8]

In the sin and failure of the church, we see the darkness and ugliness for which Christ suffered and died. But we also see the spectacular hope that in the midst of sinners, God can bring forth redemption, repentance, and transformation. We gaze in weakness, with dim eyes, on the power of God.

And here's a further complication: the church is not an entity outside of me. I do not stand on the outside looking in. I am as much part of the church as (in the words of Paul) a hand is a part of a body. That means that when I see sin in the church, I am implicated in it. I contribute to the brokenness of the church. I have dealt wounds to others; I have been unfaithful to the bridegroom. Every church leader and church member is, in no insignificant way, a failure. But here too we see God's power because, in this body of Christ, we find a place where we can be gloriously and devastatingly

human. We find a place where we can fail and repent and grow and receive grace and be made new. Like a family—but even closer than a family—we can learn to live together, weak and human, in the goodness and transformation of God.

In the Christian faith it's almost a philosophical principle that the universal is known through the particular and the abstract through the concrete. We love people universally by loving the particular people we know and can name. We love the world by loving a particular place in it—a specific creek or hill or city or block. The incarnation of Jesus is the ultimate example of this principle, when the one who "fills all in all" became a singular baby in a tangible body in a particular place in time.

It's easy for the church to exist only in our mind as an abstract ideal. I can speak of church matters—of ecclesiology—on a cosmic scale, in academic or exalted tones, conjuring vague images of saints in white robes. But our love for the church universal is worked out in the hard pews (or folding chairs) of our particular, local congregation. A local congregation, a parish, is our small, concrete entry into the universal church. It is the basic unit of Christian community and the place where we encounter God in Word and sacrament. The body of Christ—ancient, global, catholic—is only known, loved, and served through the gritty reality of our local context.

And that's where things get both more difficult and more interesting. Because people like Rebekka sit near me in church—people who know me, who get me, who I trust and laugh with as we gather in small group over the study of Scripture and a plate of spaghetti. But there are other people around me in the pews, people I find irritating or awkward, people who vehemently hold political opinions

I find suspect, people with whom I have nothing in common outside of our shared membership in this community of the saints. Some of those I practice call and response with each week would not be people I'd ever want to go with on a long road trip.

The body of Christ is made of all kinds of people, some of whom I find obnoxious, arrogant, self-righteous, or misguided (charges, I'm sure, others have rightly applied to me).

Those who were winning at life saw no need for this life-disrupting Savior. The people of God are the losers, misfits, and broken.

From the beginning, relationships in the church were fraught. Peter and Paul must have made for awkward dinner guests when Paul publically opposed Peter to his face, as we're told in Galatians. If I had been there, I'd likely have changed the subject, offered everyone dessert, and made a note not to invite Peter and Paul to the same party.

We are drawn to those we find lovely and likable. Yet those Jesus spent his time among—and those most drawn to Jesus—were the odd, the disheveled, and the outcast. Those who were winning at life saw no need for this life-disrupting Savior. The people of God are the losers, misfits, and broken. This is good news—and humiliating.

God loves and delights in the people in the pews around me and dares me to find beauty in them. To love his people on earth is to see Christ in them, to live among them, to receive together Word and sacrament. I have stories of meeting fellow parishioners who, at first, I think I could never like but who, over time, become dear to my heart. There's an elderly man I went to church with years ago, a

widower with slicked-back hair, polished shoes, and a subtle smell of cigarette smoke and Bengay. The first time we met he said something offensive and seemed crotchety. But we kept showing up to church, and over time I saw how he served those around him and heard more of his story. He walked with a limp and had chronic pain. I began to notice how he'd grin when he saw a toddler dancing in the back of the church. I grew to like him—maybe even, at times, to love him. He limped each week down the aisle to communion—a broken old man, rough around the edges, sometimes mean. And yet he was on his way, limping to redemption.

We work out our faith with these other broken men and women around us in the pews. It's lackluster. It can be boring or taxing. It's often messy. It's sometimes painful. But these Christians around me become each other's call and response. We remind each other of the good news. All saints and sinners in the church share together in this gospel. The meal would be incomplete if even one of these was not at the table. It would not be good news if even one of these members were missing. As Lesslie Newbigin put it, "None of us can be made whole till we are made whole together."[9] If we are saved at all, we are saved together.

To be clear, Rebekka and I are not the church by ourselves. Nor are our relationships with close friends a stand-in for the church. The church is an eternal body, an international organism, an institution made of every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 7:9). But we enter that giant reality of Christ's church through the small realities of our week—as I show up at my church in South Austin, take communion, get to know those around me, meet a new visitor, join Christian friends for coffee, and live life among my brothers and sisters.

If ever Rebekka and I love each other well or pray for each other, our friendship is part of the work and mission of the broader organism of Christ's body. When we celebrate my kids' baptisms (Rebekka made cupcakes) or show up for small group Bible study, when we confess to each other, share a meal, or take the Eucharist together, we participate in the life of an international and ancient Christian community—we belong to each other and to those on the other side of the globe.

And today, in my spare minutes, calling a friend on a Tuesday evening, I am part of a larger story—not only the larger story of my friendship with Rebekka but the cosmic story of Christ redeeming his bride. Rebekka and I talk through struggles in our marriages, decisions we're worried about, or a good book we've read, and in this small call and response, we live life together as those baptized, those in the church, those who belong to Christ and, in Christ, to each other.