

Sermon for January 27, 2019

One Body

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

The Reverend Roger Pancost

Anyone who has ever served on a church board or committee knows that there are times when people find themselves in disagreement with one another. Thom Rainer, the head of a church consulting firm invited people to share in a Twitter survey some of the church fights they had witnessed. Here are a few of the responses he received:

1. A fight over whether or not to build a children's playground or to use the land for a cemetery.
2. A church dispute of whether or not to install restroom stall dividers in the women's restroom.
3. A church argument and vote to decide if a clock in the worship center should be removed.
4. A 45 minute heated argument over the type of filing cabinet to purchase: black or brown, 2, 3, or 4 drawers.
5. A big church argument over the discovery that the church budget was off by .10 cents. Someone finally gave a dime to settle the issue.
6. A dispute in the church because the Lord's Supper had cran-grape juice instead of grape juice.
7. Arguments over what type of green beans the church should serve.
8. An argument on whether the church should allow deviled eggs at the church meal.
9. A major conflict when the youth borrowed a Crockpot that had not been used for years.
10. A dispute over whether the worship leader should have shoes on during the service.

(Thom Rainer, Twenty-five silly things church members fight over)

Although these church disputes sound unbelievably petty, they reflect the fact that from the very first years of the Christian Church there have been arguments between its members. This is true of the church that the Apostle Paul started in Corinth. In Corinth there is disagreement regarding which of the members are more important. In this morning's reading from the First Letter to

the Corinthians Paul uses the image of the human body to talk about unity in the church.

The metaphor of comparing a community to the human body was not invented by Paul. Secular writings at that time used the image to keep people in lower classes in “their place.” Those individuals at the lower end of the social stratum were encouraged to stay put and be grateful for the guidance and protection of their superiors.

At the time Paul wrote this letter, Corinth was one of the Roman Empire’s major trade centers. The population consisted largely of a few people who enjoyed the wealth of the empire and many others who lived on the edge of poverty.

Unlike other writers of his time, Paul uses the image of the human body to speak about equality, saying, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” Paul goes on to say that in the same way that every member of the human body is essential to the well-being of the body, every person in the church is essential to the well-being of the church. He takes this comparison even further saying that those members that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those that we think less honorable are clothed with greater honor.

Paul reminds the members of the church in Corinth that every person has unique gifts and is important to the whole. For members of the church to be different is not only acceptable, it is necessary for the richness, wholeness and life of the body.

When Paul writes that the body, or the church, has been formed so that there might be no dissension, he is not saying there won’t be any differences of opinion. The word that we translate as “dissension” comes from the Greek word schism. The literal meaning of this word is “to divide in parts or tear in pieces.” Paul is not suggesting that there has to be uniformity of thought and voice. Rather, he is reminding the people that unity in the church is expressed in the mutual care of the members. People are to support one another in times of suffering and rejoice with those who are being honored.

I am pleased to say that I see this happening in the United Church of Christ, Midland all of the time. Every week people in this church offer care to one another during difficult times. On a regular basis we rejoice with those who are being honored.

Caring for those within the church is one function of the body of Christ; the other function is being Christ's hands, feet, and voice in the world. In this morning's reading from Luke we hear Jesus telling the people in his hometown what his ministry is all about. Using the words of the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus, says,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

We, the members of the church, are empowered by the Spirit of God to do the work of Christ in the world today. We bring good news when we proclaim that every person is loved by God. We bring good news when we help to meet the physical needs of those who are financially poor. We bring good news when we advocate for the rights of those who have no voice in the world, including the right to health care and legal representation.

Bringing good news also means reaching out to those who are feeling poor in spirit. One way we do this is by extending a warm welcome to those who come to this church. The Reverend Karen Stokes describes what this welcome looks like, saying, “The inviting church is a tangible expression of the hospitality of God; people come in search of meaning in their lives, spiritual growth, deeper relationship with Christ; opportunities to be of service in the world. They also come in search of authentic community, a place where they can experience a sense of belonging.” (Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume Stokes p. 280)

It is easy to laugh at the examples of church disagreements that I shared at the beginning of this sermon and yet I have personally witnessed similar disagreements. I can remember at another church sitting in meetings for several months while people argued about what type of trash cans should be purchased for the back of the church.

The reality is that there are always going to be disagreements in every church. Some of these disagreements will be very minor, others will have great significance. The Apostle Paul reminds us that a healthy church acknowledges the value of every member and invites people to share their thoughts. Rather than allowing differences to tear the church apart, the members offer support to one another as they strive to do the work of Christ in the world. Thanks be to God for the Church. Thanks be to God for this church. Amen.