

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
January 27, 2019
Title: A Healthy Body
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

“Many gifts, one Spirit, one love known in many ways. In our difference is blessing, from diversity we praise One Giver, One Lord, One Spirit, One Word known in many ways, hallowing our days. For the Giver, for the gifts, praise, praise, praise!”ⁱ

Think about that for a minute – our differences are a blessing; our diversity is a reason to praise God. We have many gifts, talents, abilities, but they all come from one Holy Spirit, from one God.

On Monday we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. day. There were many quotes from him floating around Face Book and other places, but one in particular speaks to what we are looking at today. He wrote, “In a real sense all life is interrelated. All men [and women] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be . . . This is the interrelated structure of reality.”ⁱⁱ

We have seen vivid illustrations of the way that what happens to one group of people affects other groups of people. We heard about how Uber drivers, restaurant workers, custodial staff and others were not Federal Workers but were affected by the government shutdown in serious ways. There is a ripple effect to everything that happens and often that ripple effect is not foreseen or not considered when important decisions are made.

Now, I'm not really planning to talk about the government shut down, the ending of which was announced while I was writing, but it does supply a good illustration of the interrelatedness that Martin Luther King Jr wrote about, and that our Scripture today describes. The Apostle Paul began this chapter from 1 Corinthians by saying, "I do not want you to be uninformed." He wanted the people of Corinth to learn and understand where our spiritual gifts come from, the many types of gifts we have, and that they must be activated by the Holy Spirit. He emphasized that these gifts are to be used for the common good, not just for ourselves.

One of the exciting things about Scripture is that there are truths that are timeless, and this is one of them. It is still important for us today to understand that our gifts, whatever they may be, are given to us for the good of all. Every gift is important and is a necessary part of God's world, our faith community, and how we live out our faith in the world.

You know that as a congregation, during this year, we are looking carefully at all of our life together and how God calls us to be together in this world. We are discerning who God is calling us to be, what God is calling us to do, and how we are responding to that call. I believe that looking honestly at all these things will help all of us to go deeper in our faith and become more of the people God knows that we can be. We know that this will likely mean some changes and we may find that God is calling us to try out some new ideas or ministries. This may mean leaving behind some ideas, or projects or other things that we like. We don't know any of that yet. We only know that whenever we seriously ask God to guide us, we may find ourselves going into uncharted territory.

But we also know that there are some things that are so important to who we are that they cannot be left behind – they form the very basis of

who we are, who we have been and who we will always be. Today's reading from 1 Corinthians highlights one important part of this.

We are the Body of Christ – much like a human body – made up of many different people. We look different, we sound different, and in many ways, we are different from each other. But in other very important ways we are the same. We are all children of God and each and every one of us has received gifts from God, gifts that are to be used in our lives, in our church, in our neighborhood and in our world to help benefit the common good, the greater good, the mission of Jesus Christ.

In this mission there is no room for ego. There is no room for thinking that we are better than someone else because we have a gift that we think is more important than someone else's. There is no room for opting out, for thinking that we don't belong, or that we are not as important as someone else because we think our gifts are less important, or even that we do not have any gifts.

Let me read the First Corinthians passage again, but this time from a very loose very different paraphrase written just for today.

“Indeed, the church does not consist of one member but of many. If the choir members were to say, ‘Because we are not Sunday School teachers or youth leaders, we do not belong to the church,’ that would not make them any less a part of the church. And if the people who focus on mission and outreach projects were to say, ‘Because we are not Trustees, we do not belong to the church’, that would not make them any less a part of the church.

“If the whole church were financial persons, where would the altar settings, banners, and communion elements be? If the whole body were

ushers and nursery workers where would the good food at fellowship and meals be? If all were the same, where would the whole church be?

“As it is, there are many members, but one church. The pastor cannot say to the custodian, ‘I have no need of you’, nor can the organist say to the Lector, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, all members of the church body are needed.

“God has so arranged the church that there may be no dissension within the church, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with him or her. If one member is honored, all rejoice together.

“Now you are the body of Christ, the church of Christ, and individually members. And God has appointed in the church pastors, musicians, teachers, those with gifts of hospitality, financial and property stewardship, administration, worship design, ushering, child care, missions, outreach and many other gifts. Do we all possess the same gift? Do we all do the same things?”ⁱⁱⁱ

I had a conversation this week with a woman who was asking me if I were involved in a variety of social justice issues. At first, I felt a little guilty saying that while I was concerned about the specific issues she mentioned, they were not ones where I was putting a lot of energy. I affirmed her action in these specific areas and told her that I was grateful for people who feel passionate and respond to each of these issues. I assured her that I had other areas where I choose to put some of my energy.

I recognize that none us can be highly involved in everything we care about. When we try to do that, we experience burnout, or feeling scattered and ineffective. We may remember that even Jesus took time to go off by himself to be alone with God in prayer. We remember that Jesus didn't

heal every person in the world at the time he lived, nor did he feed every person who was hungry. Even Jesus was limited by the number of hours in the day and the reality that he could only be in one place at one time. We all need to say, “yes” to personal involvement in some things and “no” to others. This does not mean we do not care, but rather that we care enough to make wise decisions about how we use the time, energy, and resources God has given to us. Sometimes these are difficult decisions.

Before I went to seminary, I had been on many different committees in the church and had done a variety of different things, but I had never served on the Board of Trustees. My first assignment was to a 5-month interim position in a church where I attended my first ever Trustees meeting. At that meeting, there were carpet samples and the members of the Trustees spent what seemed to me a long time discussing which carpet was going to go in the church entryway.

I was bored by the discussion of pile height and number of strands per square inch and which color would be best. I was really bored and frustrated and wondered why we were spending so much time on this. I remember thinking to myself, “Why are we doing this? There must be some group that should be doing this.” Suddenly, I realized that we were, in fact, the very group that should be having that conversation. I became grateful for the men and women who were able to focus on this decision and recognized what they were discussing as something that was important to the church.

More than 40 years ago, Murray Bodo, a Franciscan monk wrote a book of meditations and poems to pray by. It is called Song of the Sparrow and one meditation in there has stayed with me for many years. He wrote, “When I compare myself with others, I have an immense sense of failure, of

inadequacy because I see only their strengths which seldom are my strengths. But when I forget comparisons and look only to what needs to be done, what can be done, I am at peace in the knowledge that I have something to give, something to offer. If I give of myself, it will make a difference, even though someone else could have given more, could have loved more perfectly, could have succeeded where I failed. If only everyone realized that the gift he (or she) can give is unique and does make a difference. What pain of self-pity (we) would be spared! We can never be the people we admire. We can only be ourselves, and that alone is admirable.”^{iv}

Not only is it important to realize that each of us is good enough and that each of us has different gifts, abilities, and passions, and not only is it important to realize that as the body of Christ we need each person’s gifts in order for us to function at our best, but we also need to realize that these gifts do not operate independently. We can’t just bring them all together and say, here it is. We need to work together so that together our gifts produce something greater than what any of us can do on our own.

What do you think would happen if I didn’t tell Jim what hymns we were going to sing on a Sunday or what the theme of the sermon and service were, and Jim just played any hymn he wanted? What would happen if Jim didn’t tell the choir which anthem they were going to sing and while he started to play, each choir member sang whichever song they wanted? What would happen if we didn’t know who was teaching a Sunday School class on a particular day? There might be several teachers for one class, or none? What would happen if we didn’t ask people to bring refreshments for coffee hour on a particular day? Some weeks we would

have a ton of food and others there would be none. We definitely need to work together in order for the body here to function smoothly.

But, as the body of Christ, we want to do more than function smoothly, we want to be and do all that God calls us to be. That requires the various gifts working together in a way that is more than just every gift being present. There are people in this church who are really good about picking up the telephone and calling someone they haven't seen to check on them. I'm grateful when those persons sometimes share with me what they have learned. There are people who are good at greeting and welcoming a visitor. There are people who are good at paying attention to small details and others who are better at seeing the big picture.

Each of us also takes these gifts with us into our families, our homes, our places of employment, the places where we gather with friends or strangers. God is able to use each of our gifts in all of our lives in ways that we may never begin to imagine.

I'm reading a wonderful book called, Canoeing the Mountains. You'll hear more about it at other times I'm sure, but one illustration in there, helps me see the importance not only of all of us functioning together but also of all of us allowing ourselves to be changed a little bit. Tod Bolsinger, the author describes making a stew in a Crock-Pot.

He says that, "Every person is like a hard, raw vegetable or a firm piece of uncooked meat. Each has its own identity, opinions and beliefs. For the pieces of food to become a meal that will feed a hungry tribe, each bit must be transformed at least a bit. Each vegetable must be softened, the meat must share its flavor, and each morsel must contribute to a healthy sauce for all to share. When the components combine, we end up with something altogether different and tastier than if we were to cook

carrots separate from the beef and separate from onions and then put them all together.”^v

God has great plans for each one of us in our personal lives, and for all of us together as the body of Christ here at Wesley United Methodist Church in Lincoln, RI.

As Martin Luther King Jr, reminds us we are all interrelated. As Paul reminds us in I Corinthians, we are all part of the body and every part is important and valued by God. As Tod Bolsinger reminds us when we come together something new and wonderful is produced; something that is greater than just the sum of our parts. When we are all working together to make and grow disciples, no task is less important than another, no person is more important than another, and every one of us is important to God’s plan.

Paul isn’t done talking about the gifts God has given us and ends this chapter with the words, “But strive for the greater gifts.” That, my friends, is our focus for next week, a time when we will worship together, celebrate communion together, and share in the celebration of baptism.

“Many gifts, one Spirit. One Love known in many ways. In diversity is blessing, from diversity we praise One Giver, One Lord, One Spirit, One Word known in many ways, hallowing our days. For the Giver, for the gifts, praise, praise, praise!”^{vi}

ⁱ Carmines, Al. “Many Gifts, One Spirit” UMH #114

ⁱⁱ King, M. L., & Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. (1968). "Letter from a Birmingham jail.". Atlanta, Ga.:Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

ⁱⁱⁱWritten by me for use in this sermon.

^{iv} Bodo, Murray , O.F.M. Song of the Sparrow St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio c.1976

^v Bolsinger, Tod, Canoeing the Mountains, Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory. InterVarsity Press, Ill. Loc.2225ff

^{vi} Carmines, Al. “Many Gifts, One Spirit” UMH #114