



University Christian Church – Austin

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Do You Need Anybody?

Epiphany 3, c, Jan. 24, 2010

1 Cor. 12:12-18

All over the world today Christians are lifting up a common theme. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity extends from this past Monday until tomorrow. Begun in 1908, these days have been set aside each year so that Christians the world over may share the prayer of Jesus: "that all may be one... that the world may believe" from John 17:21. And Since Christian Unity has been "the polar star" for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) since our inception 200 years ago, among our congregations this theme is getting especially strong focus.

A wonderful theological basis for our call to Christian unity comes from our reading this morning in 1 Cor. 12. Paul develops the notion that all Christians that are called together into the life of Christ's church are one part of the one body of Jesus Christ and that we are arranged within that body by the Spirit of God to offer our particular gifts to glory of God.

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Now, the first characteristic we would hope to find in any healthy body- and also in the Body of Christ – is a the cooperation of all its individual parts pulling together in harmonious purposes. Verse 12 says, "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. " ⁱ

A consistent theme running through the whole of the New Testament is a strong admonition that we in the church not allow our differences divide us, but instead let our

common goals glue us together.

Chad Sheron, now a well-known doctor, was formerly a basketball player back in the early 1990's at my alma mater, Vanderbilt University, the year we won the South Eastern Conference title. Chad combined his knowledge of teamwork and medicine to describe how a body is supposed to work in unity. He observed that the various types of cells of the human body are designed to work together to enhance the health and life of the entire body. But occasionally, a cell can begin growing and functioning out of sync with the other cells. It begins growing for its own purposes, and no longer follows the same blueprint as the other cells. This type of cell is called a mutagen, and mutagens are – you guessed it- the cells that create a cancer in the body. As Chad says, "Just as mutagens cause cancer in the human body, people who behave like mutagens can have a cancerous effect on a team."ⁱⁱ But, the opposite is also true. If we, as individual Christians, would honor the one mind and the central purpose of Christ's Spirit; if nothing else in life mattered to us as much as helping bring in the Kingdom of God, we would, indeed, be transforming the world. ⁱⁱⁱ

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And there is another characteristic of the authentic body of Jesus Christ. The real church will always be a strong, community united in a deep compassion for one another. As I Cor. 12:26 says:

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Especially in our day this might be hard to understand. The early 21st century finds us in the US prone to a rugged individualism that prizes individual energy & resourcefulness, individual tenacity & responsibility. We don't want others to know of our troubles. We want to handle them quietly by ourselves or within the close circle of family.

In 1988 Becca and I were leaving the first congregation we had served as pastors. We had been 8 years in that little town of 2,000 people in west Michigan and because of the privileged sharing that we as pastors I could look:

- at the house across the street from the church and know that a husband and wife in advancing years there were frightened to their cores by the increasingly common heart problems the wife was experiencing.

- In the house next to that an underemployed single woman was valiantly trying to care for her aged and increasingly infirm mother by herself.

- In the house next to that a couple was struggling with a teenage son whose rebellious behavior was causing run-ins with the law.

We knew that in every single house down that stretch of street people were struggling silently within. While outwardly the fences were straight and painted; the lawns mown; and the family members smiled and answered “I’m just fine” when asked how they were doing at church by friends.

Sometimes I was nearly overwhelmed that these good people were suffering silently and much more painfully than need be, because they refused to admit to one another the depth of their hurt. Those few who were brave enough to share their struggle with others at their church came to discover that when you share the tough times with the church family you find a new bedrock of strength on which to stand.

Now, I’m not trying to embarrass anybody, but I want everybody to take a moment and look at the people around you. Just look around you for a moment. Whether you know it or not, there are people on all sides of you whose hearts are breaking. People who are confused, angry, lost, scared, or broken in spirit. They need you. You need them. That’s what the church is to be all about. We find that support and are able to give that support, only to the degree that we are open and honest with each other.^{iv}

I thank God for family, the nuclear family, which can teach us lessons for living in the church family, the body of Jesus Christ. Over this Christmas break Becca, Marie and I went to Florida to be with my mother and 3 of my sisters and their families. With exceptions of Becca and my brothers-in-law, who bought in to the family package deal when they married their spouses, none of the rest of us chose one another as family. Yet there aren't closer bonds on earth than the bonds of marriage and family love.

This trip my oldest sister brought her Christmas gift to share. It was the Beatles Rock Band outfit for the Nintendo Wii game console. There was a mic for singing with the Beatles songs, a guitar and a drum set for playing along. Each of these three inputs are continuously judged by the game system:

- whether you are singing on key;

- whether your strumming the right guitar chords at the right time;

- and whether you are drumming at the right time on the right drum head. For those of us with less musical ability this is clear setup for complete embarrassment.

But once we were coaxed into participating in the game we found out new things about other. It was no surprise to me that my nephew Ben would never even try being the singer, but I was surprised at how good he was on the guitar. Becca, bless her heart, would sing most enthusiastically; but quite off key. On the other hand, she has a real knack for the drums. My niece, Mimi, whom I'd never heard sing before, as she's so quiet and reserved, turns out to be able to hit a perfect score for her singing.

1. I was already beginning to get the message of each providing his or her gifts to the communal project when I looked across the room and saw my mom, in her mid-80's, belting out "With a Little Help from My Friends." The refrain goes

I get by with a little help from my friends,

I get high with a little help from my friends,

Oh, I'm gonna try with a little help from my friends.

Do you need anybody,
I need somebody to love.
Could it be anybody
I want somebody to love.

Now, mom has never been a Beatles fan, but she was ready to chime in with the family group's singing project, and if she'd been measured, I'll bet she'd have gotten a pretty good score.

And then quite suddenly I recognized that the words were true for Mom. "I need somebody to love." And as I looked around, the words were also true for Ben and Becca, for Mimi and for me. In the embrace of family we all "will get by with a little help."

And that is a model we should adopt in church as well. Many of you had a chance to hear Marti McLain's daughter, Melinda, who sang here in worship right after Christmas. Melinda's good friend in California is singer and songwriter Ken Medema – whose song entitled "If This Is Not a Place," questions the true purpose of our larger family, the church. If we the Church are not the body of Christ in the world, he asks, then what good are we? The words go,

"If this is not a place where tears are understood, Then where shall I go to cry?"

"And if this is not a place where my spirit can take wings, Then where shall I go to fly?"^v

My friends, my sisters and brothers, Christ's Spirit fills our world and inspires so much of what we Christians do. But it is Christ's body that an unbelieving world needs to see. They need to see us working together in unity and compassion, not for our own selfish goals, but for the cause of Jesus and the good of one another.

And the reason that is so essential, is because it is only through the body of Christ - that is us, my friends - that this world will ever come to know Jesus.

i We in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ have long touted the words of founder Thomas Campbell in his "Declaration and Address," 1809 **"We submit that the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one, consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the scriptures, and manifest the same by their tempers and conduct, and one else, as none else can be truly and properly be called Christians."**

ii The Magic of Teamwork by Pat Williams, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, 1997, p. 10.

iii Another characteristic of the authentic body of Christ is equality, that is, where everyone and everyone's gifts to share with the body, are held in the same esteem. Last week we focused on how in our nation racial differences have divided peoples and how the lack of equality has besmirched the body of Christ. That is a glaring example of what we are to avoid, but there are certainly others. Consider economic inequality.

Our worldwide economic systems tend to value persons for the ability to provide some benefit to wider society, or those clever enough or powerful enough to gain economically at the expense of others.

A few years ago an article in *The Other Side* magazine said, for example, that "Today, 358 people own the same amount of assets as 45 percent of the world's population. The richest 20 percent own 80 percent of the resources while the poorest 20 percent own 1.5 percent."

So that's how the world values us all, but Jesus' evaluation is completely different. Jesus clearly loved society's outcasts. He ministered to the lowly and the poor, those with physical handicaps and those who society had branded as sinners. In Jesus' eyes everyone is as valuable as anyone else.

Take a look at how this plays out in the Christian community we discover in the New Testament book the Acts of the Apostles. In Chapters 2 and 4 we find all those barriers that the rest of society held to separate rich and poor, men and women, educated and uneducated were all torn down! They were together the Beloved Community that Dr. King's dream was made of. Acts 2 tells us:

"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." That sounds like an equality that you and I have never known.

iv This passage and several other thoughts here spring a sermon, "A Healthy Body" by King Duncan

v Ken Medema, "If This Is Not a Place," copyright 1982, Glory Sound Music Co.