

FILLING OUR BIBLICAL BACKPACKS FOR THE JOURNEY: THE CHURCH AS
THE BODY OF CHRIST

A sermon preached at Broadview Community UCC
March 30, 2014 Rev. Gail Crouch

Scripture: I Corinthians 12: 1-26

Our biblical backpack is getting fuller as we add scriptures to it each week. And we have employed this particular lens through which to read those scriptures:

God loves us and came to us in Jesus to show us how to love, that we all might have life and have it abundantly.

Most of the scriptures we have placed in the pack up until now have focused on both historical and personal Judeo/Christian stories that help us understand who we are and how we are called to be followers of Jesus. How can we as individual Christians learn to love that all might have abundant life? Today we move to the communal as we look at how our Christian tradition calls us to be church together. But because we also come as individuals, this scripture speaks to both the communal and personal. The words of Jesus do not appear in this scripture from Corinthians but the Spirit of the Risen Christ permeates all of the Apostle Paul's words.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Corinth around 54 A.D. So Jesus had been dead for quite a few years and the number of folks who knew him personally had dwindled. Paul was not a disciple, a close friend of Jesus, but had a powerful conversion experience and becomes the person who, more than anyone else, will help grow the Christian church. His personal sense of the living Christ and his deep faith drives him to act as a pastor/teacher/prophet to many churches spread across the Roman Empire, including sites in present day Italy, Greece and Turkey.

The city of Corinth included people who were Romans, Greeks, Jews, Egyptians, and Syrians. It was a very cosmopolitan city and each of these groups had their own religious beliefs, customs and rituals. The hardest work of the newly formed Christian church there was to find a way to bring together all this diversity into some kind of unity. For while society still divided people, categorizing them as slave or free; Jew or Gentile; male or female; the Christian church was trying to do away with these differences and create a truly integrated community.

Apparently the congregation in Corinth had been arguing over which spiritual gifts were more important. Some members wanted everyone to develop the same gift, (perhaps speaking in tongues) and to be a homogenous community. The members thought a uniform way of being church was desirable. But Paul argues for the strength of diversity, the importance of all of our gifts.

Paul understands the scope of this task of integrating all peoples into one community and his decision to use the body as an image, a metaphor of the church is brilliant. Instead of trying to discuss Christian unity in highly sophisticated theological terms (which mostly bore or confuse!) he uses the everyday example of our body. And Paul stresses that diversity does not just happen but is a part of God's gift to the church. It is God "who arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." By making diversity a gift of God, differences cannot be ignored or viewed as limitations.

Paul also stresses that the members of the body need one another and he uses sarcasm to explain this: "If the foot said I'm not elegant like Hand...I guess I don't belong to this body;" or "ear says I'm not beautiful like eye, limpid and expressive, so I don't belong..." Nonsense, says Paul, if the body is all eye how could it hear or if all ear how could it smell? All parts of the body are needed. We all have gifts and all of our gifts are necessary.

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A few years ago I was a minister in residence at Eden, our UCC seminary in St. Louis. Part of what they asked of me was to preach and get involved with one of the rural churches in the area. So one day I made my way out to the little town of Hermann, population 2000. But even in that tiny town, there were numerous churches, including St. John's UCC, and I would quickly learn that which church you belonged to defined who you were in some minds. It was explained to me by Ethel, one of the matriarchs of the UCC church: the Methodists are busy-bodies; if you go there everyone knows your business. The Episcopalians are snobs, mostly the richer folks in town; the Pentecostal Baptists are all crazy (they speak in tongues) and the Catholics are the largest church in town so run all the politics. A little taken aback I asked, "What about the UCC?" Well, said Ethel, we are the only church goes with brains!

But I soon learned that even in St. John's, there were various labels that defined folks and there was a hierarchy of gifts. "Mabel is head of the sewing guild and makes a gorgeous quilt, but don't eat her cookies at coffee hour, they're terrible. And having good cookies at coffee hour is more important than making quilts." "Edith plays the piano well enough but she can't really sing and we so need some kind of choir." "John knows how to fix the furnace but they want him to serve on the finance committee and he can't balance his own checkbook." Members were described to me on the basis of what they could and could not do. The problem was sometimes those members were needed to do what they did not do so well. Mabel, the quilter who couldn't bake, was the only one willing to organize coffee hour. And John, who "couldn't balance his own checkbook" was not only willing to be on the finance committee but his brother was a bank official and could help the church get a loan. The church had spent a lot of time arguing about who should do what and who was more important.

So I, of course, boldly stepped into it all and preached a sermon on today's passage about the church as the body of Christ and how all our gifts are needed. I was sure that after hearing the words of scripture and my comments on them, that peace would reign and everything could be sorted out. The best I can say about their reaction to my sermon was that I learned anew the meaning of the word humbled.

Oh, they said, that is all well and good to read the bible and talk about it but the reality of our church is different and there are some gifts that are simply more important. If we don't get a choir and have good cookies at coffee hour, no new members will come. If we don't get that bank loan from John's brother, we can't fix the leaky roof. Some gifts are more necessary. But after a lot of urging they agreed to sit down and do some bible study and talk about how to be church together.

It took awhile, months actually, and long after I was gone, for them to consider what it meant for everyone to offer their gifts to help the work of the church. Eventually, someone else agreed to take over the coffee hour and asked the best bakers in the church to make the cookies. Mabel and her friends in the quilting group made a large, gorgeous quilt that sold at a fair for a lot of money, and they realized they could help repair the church roof by making and selling more quilts. A new member did join who loved singing and could assist Edith with the music for worship. Gradually, the discord over who could do what began to diminish and the congregation began to discover that all gifts are important and unless they worked together as a body, the church could not flourish. The church is the Body of Christ and all of us are needed to help the church be alive and vibrant.

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You know what this means. Your pastor of many years has left and you do not yet have someone to take his place. But I have been impressed with how each of you offers some gift to keep this community of faith alive. Some of you volunteer and coffee hours happen (with great food!); others of you are offering your gift of singing and a choir will be present on Easter morning. The grounds are being renovated and will look beautiful as the new plantings grow and because of your gifts of time and expertise that they will blossom for all to enjoy. You volunteer to lead worship, teach the children and adults, bring flowers, lead meetings, and work to find a new pastor. Everyone is needed. Because you are sharing all of your gifts, the church as the Body of Christ is alive and well in this place.

But to survive you may also need to reinvent yourselves in some way. Change, not always very comfortable may need to happen. Looking again at the image of the body we know changes occur over time. We lose some hearing, our eyesight dims, the limbs do not work as well or as easily. And we learn new ways of being and doing to adapt to those changes. In the months ahead you may learn new ways of being church and that is both scary and exciting. But you will still be the body of Christ together.

There can be, however, some danger when we sink into this image of being the Body of Christ, it is comfortable here, maybe too comfortable. If church is the place where I am known, loved and accepted just as I am; if this is a place where we work together and support each other as the body works together, we may end up being self-sufficient and autonomous. And the church can never rest in that place. The United Church of Christ has struggled with that for a long time. Because we honor autonomy and because the

“power base” of the denomination is the local church, it is easy to forget that we are in covenant both with other congregations and with a national body.

In just a month, our annual meeting of the Conference will be held – here in Seattle. So it will be easy for all of you to attend. There is no hotel cost; you can go as a visitor and hear the speakers and listen to the various business meetings and meet other UCC folk from the rest of the state, Alaska and Idaho. I strongly encourage you to both send official delegates and to go as visitors. You might talk with folks from Ritzville, who faced with a dwindling congregation and budget, eventually found another congregation with whom to merge. They both survived and are healthy today. You might talk with the majority of congregations in our conference who are about your size and learn how they do vibrant ministry as a small church. So show up April 25-27. You will learn much.

And the very image of being a body means there are hands, feet, ears and eyes beyond this community of faith that we need and who need us. The wonderful cellist Pablo Casals, in speaking about the world, use to say, “Love of country is a wonderful thing, but why should love stop at the border?” Being the Body of Christ never stops at the doors of one particular church. We love the sense of unity; and we believe in diversity. So where does the church exist – in unity or in diversity? I suggest we need unity AND diversity and the church resides in the AND of that statement. The church can be the place where both unity and diversity are held together – sometimes in tension. The Spirit of God blows out beyond our boundaries. Where are the edges of our faith calling us to be? How will Broadview UCC be different in 5 or 10 years? How as the Body of Christ, will you all bring the Good News to those thirsting for it? That is both your task and your joy.

We place this scripture in our biblical backpack because it is a guide, a roadmap, for the journey we travel together as a congregation and as the wider church. It reminds us that we are not alone as we learn how to be loving disciples of Jesus.

God loves us and came to us in Jesus to show us how to love, that all might have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God.