

Sermon: January 17, 2016 1 Corinthians 12
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

In the coming months, The United Church of Canada will be undertaking a study on membership. While I've seen next to nothing about what is planned, I assume that we will be looking at what it means to be a "member" of a congregation, how we define "belonging" and the steps we go through in faith formation at different ages and stages of life. As more and more communities of faith emerge that don't look like a standard, Sunday morning congregation, what does it mean to belong? How do we define that, and what does it mean when a boundary places someone on the outside of that, looking in? And what exactly do we belong to? – the local congregation, the United Church of Canada, the Church universal, the body of Christ?

Long ago, the apostle Paul spoke of membership, with terminology that was as flesh-and-bones as it gets. Professor Karoline Lewis puts it this way: "The word often translated...as 'member' can also be translated as 'part' or 'limb.' While the term 'member' makes sense in the context of Paul's argument for and support of the meaning of community and the church of Christ, I do wonder if most hearers of this text equate Paul's terminology with their voluntary church membership and are not aware of Paul's radical claim in using this metaphor.

"Being a member of the body of Christ means an absolute, out-and-out conjoining of one with the other, a sister or brother in Christ. To exist in division, to see only difference and not the unity we are able to profess because of Christ, to demand conformity without celebration of difference, is to entertain the notion of dismemberment. We will find ourselves cut off from the very source of our life, our existence, and in a way, our ability to be most fully who we are."

Was Paul thinking of each congregation being, in essence A body of Christ or was he thinking of all Churches, together, being THE body of Christ? We'll come back to that a bit later but for now, let's look at the way that a local congregation can function as Christ's body.

In the Roman world, politicians like Marcus Agrippa and philosophers like Plutarch used the analogy of various parts of the body working together for a common goal. Professor Brian Peterson says that "most often, [this analogy] was used to support the social hierarchy (whether of the family, or the city, or the empire as a whole). The point was that every body needs a head, and in society that was provided by the wealthy, the rulers, and the elite. Every body needs hands and feet to do the hard and dirty work, and that was provided in society by just about everyone else." So this analogy that I think of as freshly minted by Paul was not new, in fact he may have been counting on it being so familiar that his readers were ready to finish his sentence as soon as he started.

But then Paul pulled a 180 and said, you know, the ultimate prize in all of this is NOT to be able to identify oneself with the highest and most respectable part of the body. Just because you are perceived as the brains of the operation, or have brawny attributes such as strength or stamina, or carry yourself with beauty or grace or creativity, does not score you extra points with God. What brings you closer to God is not your *independence* but your *interdependence*. You come closer to God when you realize that whatever role you play, you are part of something bigger. When we claim membership in the body of Christ, we honour not only our own contributions, but the actions and attributes of all the members. To truly belong to the body of Christ, as lived out in a congregation, is to rely on one another, to respect one another, to belong to one another, and occasionally to lean on one another. And if we are paying attention to what Paul has to say, within this body we are relying not on our own strength and expertise, but on the love of Christ, which embraces our foolishness every bit as much as our excellence.

The gifts that God draws out of us are not necessarily the things we would have expected. Theologian Frederick Buechner, speaking somewhat tongue-in-cheek, puts it like so: "When you came right down to it, what was God up to, sending them all out-prophets, apostles, evangelists, teachers, the whole tattered bunch - to work themselves into an early grave? God was making a body for Christ, Paul said. Christ didn't have a regular body any more so God was making him one out of anybody he could find who looked as if he might just possibly do. He was using other people's

hands to be Christ's hands and other people's feet to be Christ's feet, and when there was some place where Christ was needed in a hurry and needed bad, he put the finger on some maybe-not-all-that-innocent bystander and got him to go and be Christ in that place himself for lack of anybody better.”

While that might sound a bit snarky – and perhaps it is – the point is that within the body of Christ, God puts us together in surprising ways with remarkable results. A few weeks ago I stumbled across this great saying: “Sometimes our greatest ability is our availability.” I did a bit of looking and found that this was part of a bigger quote, which I see attributed to a leader within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints named Neal A. Maxwell, and his bigger quote is this: “God does not begin by asking our ability, but more of our availability. When we prove our dependability, [God] will increase our capability.”

Interpreting all this through baseball – and for those of you like me who are counting, it is only 31 days to the opening of Spring Training – I recall what it was like when my son, Jordan, started playing ball. I had always admired baseball as a younger guy but the only thing worse than my throwing and fielding was my hitting. But when Jordan was on his first team I showed up at every practice – and did some umpire training which really solidified my knowledge of the rules of play – and paid attention to the coaches as they were showing the eight year olds how to properly grip a ball and throw it accurately – and before long I was kind of an extra coach, and by the next year I was an assistant coach, and within four or five years was managing and helping out with the all-stars. My number one asset, other than the fact that my son loved baseball and I love my son, was my availability, followed pretty closely by my dependability. And because of that, my capability did grow, and my relationship with that grand old game turned from admiring from the outside, to really feeling that I was part of it and it was part of me.

While there is no comparing participation in a sport, to full engagement in Christ's mission in the world, there are parallels. We start by trusting the process, believing that God actually has a place for me in this, and don't let ourselves get tripped up by what we don't have, especially when we are brand new. So what if we're new to this, so what if the Bible was never spoken of in your family, so what if you don't have all or any of the spiritual gifts that Paul rhymes off in the first lesson we heard today. It doesn't matter... because God has placed you here, now, in this wonderful group of people where you can find a place.

Within each local family of faith, we function as a body, and in the various ministries and activities of our congregation we need the critical thinking skills of the head, the hard work of the hands and feet, the compassion of the heart, the attentiveness of the eyes and ears.

In practical terms this comes down to matching up the gifts we bring, with those things most needed by our context. From the standpoint of pure efficiency, this involves matching your skills and experiences with the needs of the congregation and the community. For sure, this is a good linear way to do it and at times, especially when specific types of expertise are needed, matching your abilities and affinities with the job that needs doing just plain makes sense.

What I find in Canmore, though, is an unparalleled wealth of experiences, and skillsets that have often been used at the top levels of your fields, whether your background is in business or athletics or health care or environmental sciences or performing arts or any of dozens and dozens of other fields. In some communities I think this would be expressed as arrogance or self-aggrandisement but here, I don't find that. Here in Canmore I find a combination of deep-seated modesty, and perhaps a sense that because you've used those gifts so regularly at work that now is the time and place to explore other parts of your personality as you seek to serve in Christ's name. And if that's something you feel urged to do – trying something new – please do so. It's great to benefit from your experiences but a learning curve can be fun, too.

Within this congregation I am delighted at your willingness to help one another, to sign up when short-term projects need doing and to dig in to parts of our mission that need more time and attention. Yes, I continue to have hope that we can figure out a sustainable shape for our children's

ministries but in so many ways this place is energetic and loving and vital. We are also, though, part of a much larger entity called “the Church Catholic” – the universal, sum-total accumulation of Christians everywhere, and that can be tricky.

A minister with the Uniting Church in Australia, Peter Lockhart, says “It may have been that when Paul listed the gifts found within the body he may have expected each house church to find those gifts located within the one community. However, what appears more likely is that Paul’s letter was addressed to a group of Christian communities within Corinth. It is entirely possible that Paul understood that the gifts would be present across the communities not in every single one.

“This is an important thing to reflect on as we consider our contemporary situation in which there are many different churches and in which we as a small congregation find that we can offer only just so much. Just as within the congregation we offer different gifts so too as a congregation we offer who we are and the gifts we have to broader witness of the church to God’s love for the world. To put it another way ‘we are who we are, we can be no other’.”

To take Peter Lockhart’s idea one step further, just as each congregation has its own style and contribution, so does each denomination. As a Minister of the United Church of Canada I am well aware of the places where we struggle but am proud of the places where we add something important to the full expression of the body of Christ. There are many of these but for the moment I am going to name four, each of which has a local tie-in.

- The United Church of Canada has a long-standing history of taking seriously the spirituality and leadership of women. This year we mark the 80th anniversary of the ordination of Rev. Lydia Gruchy, minister of Kelvington United Church in northeast Saskatchewan. As I look through the history of this congregation, 40 years ago you were served by Rev. Florence Wilkinson, and since then by Rev. Dr. Catherine MacLean and Rev. Sue Hertell. And yet in many Churches, women are still not welcome in ministry or if allowed at all, must fulfil secondary roles only. When we gather ecumenically those of us coming from the United Church can speak a different truth when it comes to the Ministry of women.
- Related to this is the issue of language. By 1980, the use of inclusive language was already widespread enough that we re-wrote our 1968 Creed. Remember the old beginning? “Man is not alone, he lives in God’s world” and we changed that to “We are not alone, we live in God’s world”, among other editorial changes. Where I notice it most sharply is in the language of our hymns: it’s going to be a lot of fun singing the oldies next week but O my goodness, some of the language is sexist! We’re going to sing them as written, and at the points where that’s a bit jarring, it will remind us of an area where progress has been made.
- The third contribution I see us making relates to the rainbow flag on the wall. On the same weekend that the Bishop of Calgary stood his ground about mandated Gay-Straight Alliances in Calgary’s Catholic Schools, and the Anglican communion worldwide stated its concerns about Churches in the USA and Canada that were performing gay marriages, I was moved beyond measure, as your Minister, to perform my first same-sex wedding yesterday after many years of expressing an openness to do so. The United Church risked a lot and lost a lot back in 1988 when openly debating the nature of LGBTQ ordination and now it has become so central to us that we have had two Moderators in a row who identify themselves within that spectrum. We are far away from many other members of Christ’s body on this particular issue but it is so important that we continue making this contribution, so that people of various sexual identities and orientations don’t feel that God has forgotten about them. The body of Christ includes all of God’s children, and we’ve got to keep saying that in our words and our deeds.
- And the fourth contribution is our deep-seated connection with social issues in general. I have been at Christian gatherings where others look at the United Church folks in the room kind of cockeyed when we start talking about social involvement as a response to the call of Christ, as in, “I can barely understand how *Church people* might get involved in those issues so I have no idea why a *whole Church* would.” Yet for us these are inseparable: our answer

to the call of Christ includes all manner of participation in the alleviation of suffering, from sponsoring refugees one household at a time, to providing leadership on environmental initiatives, to a deep commitment to interfaith dialogue, to challenging the political and economic systems that contribute to poverty and global inequality. We are certainly not alone among Christian denominations when it comes to social action, and that's a good thing because the body of Christ needs LOTS of activity in this area.

And so, as a vibrant little congregation ready to turn 125, as part of a denomination seeking a new path just past its 90th anniversary, we look for those places where we can participate in a full, meaningful way in the one, single body of Christ, Protestant and Orthodox and Catholic, Northern Hemisphere and Southern Hemisphere, Indigenous and Imported. We pay attention to the gaps, places where our voice would be particularly suited for speaking Christ's word of love. We celebrate the contributions, short-term and long-term, of those who gather in this building on Sunday mornings. As the old bumper-sticker said, we "think globally, act locally" as we open ourselves to the gifts that Christ places in our midst.

Next week, it's all about the old days of 1891, and our thankfulness for the foundations set for us by our pioneer ancestors in the faith. But today, it's about this moment, the world of today, and what the Body of Christ needs each of us to be, and all of us to be. In Christ's glorious name we act and pray, Amen.

References cited:

Buechner, Frederick, <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-body-christ>

Lewis, Karoline. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=549

Lockhart, Peter. <http://revplockhart.blogspot.ca/2013/01/the-body-of-christ-reversals-of-culture.html>

Maxwell, Neal A., quoted at <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/ability>

Peterson, Brian. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2733

+And for your own, up-to-the minute countdown clock until MLB Spring Training begins: <http://www.springtrainingcountdown.com/#sthash.QbdYwKnX.MLjdk8FC.dpbs>

© 2016, Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church