

***THE BODY OF CHRIST***  
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine  
University Congregational Church  
Worldwide Communion Sunday, 2009

**Reading: I Corinthians 12: 12 - 20 (NRSV)**

**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. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews, Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.**

**Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be?**

Today is Worldwide Communion Sunday and it will be my argument that this congregation is the body of Christ and if it is a Congregational church it sees itself as a member of the larger body of Christ. I read the other day how this works in real life and offer this analysis for those of you who like to read the abstract rather than the whole article. There are different denominations with differing missions and purposes, but they are all connected:

1. The Methodists pick you up out of the gutter.
2. The Baptists get you saved.
3. The Presbyterians get you educated.

4. The Episcopalians introduce you to high society.
5. The Methodists pick you up out of the gutter.

A man made his way quickly through the carriages of a train in Ireland, calling out, "I need a priest! Is there a Catholic priest on the train?" There was no reply. He then went back through the train, asking, "Is there a rabbi on the train?" Again there was no reply. He made his way through a third time, crying out, "OK, is there an Anglican clergyman on the train?" Still there was no answer. Finally a man in the corner of the carriage timidly raised his hand and said, "I am a Presbyterian minister, if that's of any help." The man took one look at him and said, "That's no good, we're looking for a corkscrew."<sup>1</sup>

The body of Christ is both a specific local congregation and it is the larger association of congregations. This concept is found not only in Paul's letter to the church of Corinth, but throughout the Christian congregations in the earliest centuries of the church. The argument is that in the local church there are many members, each of whom is an essential body part to the whole. **AND** the whole body of Christ is made up of hundreds of thousands of individual member congregations. The body of

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<sup>1</sup> I found both of these stories on <http://javacasa.com/humor/denom.htm>, downloaded 10/02-09 and corrected the grammar.

Christ is greater than the denomination or association of congregations that we identify as Methodist, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Congregationalists and so on. Listen to these words of Irenaeus writing about the Bishop's office of preaching in the second century:

“Having received this office of proclamation and this faith aforesaid, the church, though she be spread abroad over all the earth, diligently observes them as dwelling in a single household; and she unanimously believes these things, as having one soul and the same heart; and she concordantly proclaims and teaches and hands down these things, as having but one mouth.”<sup>2</sup>

There is not a Christian congregation in the city of Wichita and throughout the world that we are not somehow connected to. They may have a different way of worshipping, and they may have a different theology than we have, but Paul declares that all of us make up one body of faith. Many of these congregations are creedal and we are not. I dare say that we might even find ourselves at odds with some of these congregations and their ministers. We might actually disagree with them on everything from reproductive choice to the doctrine of transubstantiation. Some might not even be on speaking terms with me or us. Some even think that we are heretical and they cannot conceive of the possibility that we too are of the body of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer. I.x.2*, as quoted by Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945), pp. 40 – 41.

Paul argues that sectarian theology is not the final proof of the body of faith. It is not theology, or creed, or doctrine that binds us together. We are all in this together, he says, because in one Spirit we are all baptized into the body of Christ. Now I am not talking about how we are baptized. Some of us were sprinkled on, poured upon, immersed, or dry-cleaned. The issue is not the method. The truth is that by the power of the Holy Spirit we are washed into the community of faith by the grace of God. The enormous sea of love brings us into the harbor of sacred fellowship. We are all – every single one of us at University Congregational Church, and University United Methodist Church, and First Presbyterian Church, and Plymouth Congregational Church – vital members of the body of Christ by the grace of God.

More than acceptance or even grudging tolerance of one another, Paul reminds us that we are essential to one another. We are necessary to one another. We need each other. The body of Christ is not complete without each other. And the truth is that the body of Christ is often incomplete, not because the Spirit of God is wanting, but because our spirits are self-centered, proud, myopic, prejudiced, fearful, and intolerant.

The challenge for us this morning is to make a home for all of the parts of the body of Christ. How do we make welcome the eyes that see

the beauty and pain of the world; the ears that hear the weeping and the songs of mothers; the noses that sense the storms before the clouds have appeared; the mouths that speak truth in word and song; the hands that hold and caress? How do we receive those who keep us moving; those who whose backs bear the greatest burdens; those whose hearts are wide open to the people on the margins, such as stray teenagers and the befuddled? Where is there room for minds that wait for evidence, or imagine a new vision for the future? Who will set a place at the table for those who love us enough to guide us and hold our hands through the change that is inevitable?

I believe that such a movement in the community of faith begins with the hospitality of God. Today we will gather at the table of God with millions of people around the world. I hope that we remember that we are guests bid welcome to feed on word and sacrament. Grace put a leaf in the table of life and found the folding chairs down in the basement to make sure that we had a place at the table. Love put another loaf of bread in the oven and uncorked another bottle of wine that we are well fed.

Holy Communion is the open handed conviviality of God that says “all are welcome,” no exceptions, no probationary period. You are home.

You are safe. You are among women and men who will honor your dignity.

This past summer I taught a graduate seminar on the social gospel movement and the place of God's justice in parish ministry. Each student was required to write a social justice sermon. One student chose the text from John's gospel that tells the story of the woman caught in adultery. You recall that story and the challenge of Jesus, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." My student opened her sermon with these words:

"I have lived in constant fear that I will be stoned. I am a woman who lives with a woman. I have a female partner. I am gay. I barely even want to admit it to my self and still struggle with my place in life and who I am. Sometimes I feel as if I want to stone myself. The injustice is that I cannot live safely and free as a gay woman. I am stoned everyday by a Church that does not accept me."<sup>3</sup>

I was deeply moved by the power of such personal fear and courage. I felt brokenhearted that one might feel so alienated and frightened in the church of Jesus Christ. You see, this is a child of God. Her gender orientation does not preclude her from the grace of God. Like everyone she comes to the table hungry for the food of compassion and the cup of life. We will break bread and drink from the cup of mercy by the hand of God's gracious hospitality. I would break bread and drink from the same

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<sup>3</sup> This quotation is used with permission. The identity of the student is confidential.

cup as this student because I too am brought to God's table by God's love. That is the Spirit of baptism, or as Paul said, "We were made to drink of one Spirit."

I do not get to choose the recipients of God's grace. God did not give me the task of gatekeeper or quality controller. God did call me to welcome people to God's radically inclusive table. God did call me to hospitality. I never know who comes to the table or why. That is not my responsibility. It is my responsibility to take the bread, give thanks and bless it and share with all who will eat. It is my responsibility to lift the cup, give thanks for it, and share with all who will drink. And all across the world today all kinds of people are gathering in house churches, rural congregations, suburban churches, and central city cathedrals and tall steeple churches. There are all kinds of people in the body of Christ joining us in this sacred sacrament of God's hospitality.

You never know who comes to the table. It just might surprise you. It reminds me of the story of the little boy who wanted to meet God. He knew it was a long trip to where God lived, so he packed his suitcase with Twinkies and a six-pack of Root Beer before he started out. When he had gone about three blocks, he met an elderly man. The man was sitting in the park just feeding some pigeons. The boy sat down next

to him and opened his suitcase. He was about to take a drink from his root beer when he noticed that the man looked hungry, so he offered him a Twinkie. The man gratefully accepted it and smiled at boy. His smile was so pleasant that the boy wanted to see it again, so he offered him a root beer. Again, the man smiled at him. The boy was delighted!

They sat there all afternoon eating and smiling, but they never said a word. It grew dark and the boy realized how tired he was. He got up to leave, but before he had gone more than a few steps, he turned around, ran back to the man, and gave him a hug. The man gave him his biggest smile ever.

When the boy opened the door to his own house a short time later, his mother was surprised by the look of joy on his face. She asked him, "What did you do today that made you so happy?"

"I had lunch with God," he replied. But before his mother could respond, he added, "You know what? God's got the most beautiful smile I've ever seen."

Meanwhile, the elderly man, also radiant with joy, returned to his home. His son was stunned by the look of peace on his face and he asked, "Dad, what did you do today that made you so happy?"



He replied, "I ate Twinkies in the park with God." However, before his son responded, he added, " You know, he's much younger than I expected." <sup>4</sup>

In a few moments we will invite you to join us in the holy meal. Everyone is welcome. We gather in the Spirit of baptism that brings us to the body of Christ. May the breaking of this bread and the drinking of this cup seal our relationships with our brothers and sisters all across the world. We don't know who all of them are. But be well assured that God is among us, younger than we might expect and smiling the biggest smile we ever imagined.

*Finis*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://Halife.com/laughs/church.html>, downloaded 10/2/09.