

## The Body

Nehemiah 8:1-6, 8-10 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:12-31

Luke 4:14-21

As most of you know, our congregation is involved in discussions with three other United Church congregations about what lies ahead, and about our sense of God's call in all of this. Since the congregations are having these discussions, it struck some of the clergy that perhaps we should be having discussions as well so that we can get to know one another better and dream together about what our future might be.

Three of us have been meeting on a nearly weekly basis to discuss our theology, who we believe Jesus to be, our understanding of God, our concept of church and what we are called to do and be. At first glance, one might think that we'd have everything in common, but this IS the United Church after all, and our ideas are varied, though all within the United Church range. So it's been good for us to get beyond the social chitchat that characterises so many of our meetings and talk about the things that matter and the foundation upon which we build them. It is through conversations such as this that we can grow into shared leadership, should that be what lies ahead.

And so, as I read through the passages of scripture assigned to this week you may not be surprised to discover that although I began the week thinking I would go in one direction, I ended up headed in another. That's why I asked Doreen to add a second reading for this week, because it seemed to me that what we are truly reflecting upon in our discussions with the other congregations, is how we can most effectively be the body of Christ.

We know that at the time that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth there was dissension there – some things never seem to change. There was controversy in that church community about whose gifts were more important, and the discussions were becoming more than heated. Having heard of the dispute, Paul addresses the congregation, through a letter, challenging them to live up to their name. As the body of Christ there is no room for bitterness or competition. The sign of Christ is a sign of love. All are gifted through the same spirit. All are called to serve one Saviour and one God. There should be no dispute. There should be no competition. There should instead be a desire for harmony and mutuality of ministry. That is the life to which Paul calls the faith community at Corinth. That is the life to which Paul calls us.

Because of the cultural differences, sometimes it is hard for us to connect what is being said with our own life situations. Or, there are times when we use the situation to argue for respect for our own position while failing to grant that same respect and consideration to others. We are called to support all believers, to celebrate and honour their gifts, and then to use those gifts to work together for the greater good. We are also called to hold them accountable when they distort the truth, or when we do, when they or we fall short, and invite them to become more involved in activities which build up the body of Christ.

In the past ten days or so, we've had the opportunity to watch as people have worked together to bring relief to Haiti. We fret when we see needless suffering or frustrating delays. But we know that the will is there, and that differences are being put aside to bring help to those who have been so devastated first, by the earthquake, and then a

week later, by the aftershock. And though we might chafe, we also rejoice when there is good news.

The United Church of Canada, through our sister churches in Haiti, already had people in place when the earthquake hit, and through Action by Churches Together is ministering to people there. This is a vivid illustration of how we are the body of Christ, how when one part hurts, all hurt. We will be helping in Haiti, not simply in these days immediately following the disaster, but also in months and years to come, as the churches continue to work together on long-term reconstruction projects. It is occasions like this, that we see the church as the body of Christ at its best.

Unfortunately, occasions like this also bring out the worst in some of us, and so we hear so-called “evangelists” – blaming the earthquake on the people who are suffering from its devastating effects. Evangelists, by definition are called to be bearers of the Good News. Words of hatred or distortion, are never the source of good news. And most painful of all, when one part of the body speaks out viciously, the whole body suffers. There is no way that such distortions can be removed without causing pain.

It’s inevitable, when we speak of ourselves as the body of Christ, particularly with the physical illustration that Paul gives, to reflect on how we can and do manage not too badly without certain bodily parts. Our tonsils and appendix, and sometimes our teeth come quickly to mind as parts that are removed without apparent ill effect. But no part is removed without cause. No part is removed without suffering.

We, as the body of Christ, can get along when all of the parts are not working together, but when we see the church working toward a

common goal, when we see the people of Christ seeking to grow together and serve together, even when we see the citywide services, we recognise and realise how much we are enriched as more and more of the body works together, as our co-ordination improves and our spirit and health reflect this growth.

So it is with each of us. Yes, we can manage without all of our parts, but sometimes not so well. And even though we, as people may manage quite well with physical restrictions, the church does not do as well.

In today's world, those who have impaired vision, function quite well. But how does a church with impaired or limited vision function? Those with hearing impairment, or a complete hearing loss, can manage. But how does a church minister if it is unable to hear the cries of its neighbours?

We are the body of Christ, called to minister together, to nurture one another in the faith, and as the body to use our gifts to bring good news to others. That's true of us as an individual, as a congregation, as a denomination. We are all a part of the body, and whatever our size or our strength, we have a significant role. Even if we feel insignificant, we are an important part. If you doubt that, think about what happens when you stub - or break - a toe, hit your funny bone, or have a toothache. When even the smallest part hurts, the entire body hurts. We ignore the smaller parts which may be suffering at our peril, for we can truly only focus on being faithful followers when we are all working together.

Learning how to work well together in the ordinary, everyday events of life, equips us to work more smoothly together in the

catastrophes, for it is the well-trained, smoothly operating body which responds best to the most difficult challenges of life.

We are called to be that body, to take the time now to develop our strengths and co-ordination so that we might respond to whatever lies ahead as the faithful body of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.