

“One Body, Bound Together” – Stephanie Wing, 8.2.09

In the 16th century, Teresa of Avila wrote: "Christ has no body on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out upon the world, ours are the feet with which he goes about doing good, ours are the hand with which he blesses his people."

In our reading this morning, we heard that the whole purpose of ministry is to build up the body of Christ. The body of Christ is an important metaphor. It is physical and active. Being a Christian doesn't just mean coming to church on Sundays; it shapes the way that we live, and the way that we use our time and talents. We are called to respond to God with our whole bodies, reaching out and serving others, using the work of our hands, feet, eyes, and other body parts to minister to the needs of the world. Even if your hands, feet, eyes, or ears don't work as well as they used to, God has plans to use your gifts for God's glory. The metaphor also speaks to the need for unity in a body that is made up of many different members, each with a different function.

Last week Andy spoke about returning to God a portion of the blessings that God has given us. That applies to money, but also to our time and talents. Sometimes the two are related. For example, there are a good number of individuals in this church who have put in time and sweat equity in fixing things, installing things, planting things, painting things, helping with office equipment or

other issues, and much more. Each of those gifts of time and talent have enabled the church to save money that might otherwise have gone to pay someone else to do the work. Of course that is the case with a lot of what we do around here.

Often times, however, we can come to rely on the same leaders to do the bulk of the work. Sometimes this is self-inflicted, as some of us tend to take on more and more responsibilities. Sometimes it is because everyone else at the table is silent when it comes time to sign up. Other times perhaps we are worried that if we don't do it, it won't get done or it won't get done the way we want it done. This path leads to burnout too quickly, and burned out leaders tend not to be very effective in the long run.

I won't ask for a show of hands to see how many of you have experienced burnout in your service to the church, either here or elsewhere, but I know that burnout is represented among those who are gathered here today, and perhaps more tellingly, those who aren't. God has gifted each of us for service in the church and in the world, but God doesn't want us to burn out! That is why we have a whole varied and diverse body of people, each with different gifts and passions. No single person can do it all, and no one should even try to do it all!

However, it is often easiest to look to the same people to take on responsibilities again and again. They are able. They are willing. They know what they're doing. But not only does that lead to burnout of our leaders, it also

prevents others from discovering and using their gifts in service to the church. If we really believe that it is God who has gathered us together as a community, just think of the discoveries we have in store as we see how each member fits into the larger body! Some of you might think you don't have much to offer, but that isn't true! Some of you might feel that you don't have the skills or expertise to be of much use, but what if those individuals who do so much for the church right now were to serve as teachers and mentors, to impart their knowledge and experience to equip others to do the same work? Part of God's amazing design is that we are created so that we need each other. Apart from the rest of the body, we are incomplete. And when the body is missing certain members, we aren't growing together and functioning to our full potential.

Functioning as a single body rather than many different individual members is no easy task, but God has created us to be Christians in community. In the early church, the apostles and evangelists always went out in pairs or groups. Co-Pastoring was actually the earliest model of church leadership! But it wasn't always easy. Take for example the disagreement and separation between Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey together, accompanied by John Mark, a cousin of Barnabas, but for some reason he did not complete the journey with them. Later, as Paul and Barnabas were preparing for another journey, Barnabas suggested bringing along John Mark once again, but

Paul disagreed. Their disagreement was so sharp that they parted company and never saw each other again. Barnabas took John Mark and Paul joined with Silas, each pair continuing in the ministry.

The disagreement wasn't over any doctrinal issue. There were doctrinal disagreements in the early church, but this rupture came down to a personal issue. Isn't that often how disagreements in our churches happen today? There might be a wide range of theological beliefs within a church, but it is more often the differences of opinion over other details that cause the biggest rifts. Personalities clash. Feelings get hurt. Church wars are waged over everything from the style of music to the color of carpet; from finances and programming to use of the building and grounds. Being the body of Christ gets infinitely more difficult when we have to work with other people!

The key goal that we need to keep in sight is that the purpose of all of our work is building up the body of Christ. In using the gifts that God has given us and calls us to use, we are using them for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. And as the writer of Ephesians notes, the body cannot grow unless each part is working properly. If some parts are working overtime and other parts are idle, that leads to an imbalance that hurts the overall body. We need to work together in order to grow into the body that God calls us to be.

Our passage today opens with the plea to the early church "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." This is a sharp reminder that the particular work to which we are called matters less than the way that we treat each other as we go about that work. The Greek text essentially is telling us to chain ourselves together in a bond of peace. Peace and unity are only a challenge when you have to practice it with other people.

The instruction to us is to bear with one another in love. In Ephesians we clearly see that love is not a feeling, but a choice. It requires us to "make every effort." And yet we also have to acknowledge that we can't make that effort on our own. We have to rely on God's grace and work of reconciliation in our lives in order to live into our calling to be humble, gentle, and patient, and to bear with one another in love. Especially as we are trying to work together as a body, especially when we are really incorporating all of our members, there will be disagreements, and in those disagreements, we must bear with one another in love and maintain a bond of peace.

Our church is over 225 years old, and the "United" in our name speaks to a long history of being a united body of Christ in spite of many differences. We have history and we have tradition, but this church does not exist just for the sake

of preserving that history and tradition. More than two and a quarter centuries after our founding, we are still called to mission and ministry as the body of Christ.

The question we must ask ourselves now is: what kind of body has God gathered us to be? What is our purpose in ministry? How are we being called here and now to build the body of Christ on earth? The answers to those questions might be quite different than they were two centuries ago, two decades ago, or even two years ago. But we are here now because God has gathered us here in order to be the body of Christ, active in ministry in the world.

Those are questions we must reflect on as a church. And as we start to discern some of those answers, we also must discern, as individual members of this body, how God is calling us to be part of the ministry here. What gifts or resources has God given us that we are now being called to use? I really believe that God has gifted each of us uniquely to fulfill some role that was made just for us.

We as a church must discern God's call. And as individual members of this body of Christ, we must discern the places where we are gifted to meet the needs of ministry. As we seek to expand our Christian education and formation programs, we need more teachers, volunteers, and more feedback. As we seek to expand our reach into the community, there are many opportunities to get involved. In the next couple of months the Nominating Committee will be meeting to discuss nominations for Elders for the class of 2012. If you would like to

nominate yourself or someone else for consideration, please talk to Nadine White, chair of that committee. And please be in prayer for the work of that committee, and for the work of the leadership in this church as we seek God's direction for ministry.

In all of this, let us remember that we are bound together as one body, under one Lord, Jesus Christ, and let us make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit, and to bear with one another in love. And remember, "Christ has no body on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ looks out upon the world, ours are the feet with which he goes about doing good, ours are the hands with which he blesses his people." May it be so.