

I Corinthians 12: 12 - 31

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 or 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? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Sermon 1/24/2010 – By Susi Kawolics

This past Wednesday evening I had the privilege of participating in the "One Family: Many Members" event hosted at Lord of Life by the Chagrin Valley Council of Churches. Every year the members of this council plan something to celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which runs from January 18th to the 25th. This year we presented an ecumenical forum. We began the evening with a potluck and then the area clergy from the different denominations each gave eight minute presentations about the beliefs and histories of their faith traditions. We who participated and attended found the evening enriching, meaningful, and very informative. One of the many things I learned that evening was the answer to this question: How many Presbyterians does it take to change a light bulb? - See what you missed by not attending? According to Rev. John Wahl from Valley Presbyterian Church, the answer to that question is: None, it will happen at the pre-destined time. He went on to say there is also a second answer which is: Seven to serve on a fact-finding committee to report back with recommendations in six months.

This is obviously not all we learned that evening, especially from John, who then went on to say how the silly answers to this joke do point to some truths about the beliefs of the Presbyterians. But the reason for me telling you about the joke is to give you a sense of the tone of the event. While all the speakers talked about the special gifts and beliefs that their traditions value, there was an atmosphere of graciousness, mutual respect and very healthy humor. We all managed to say what drew us to our particular faith practice without denigrating someone else's beliefs. For all of us who

participated, religion is a serious matter, however, we were not there to convert or convince others that ours was the best. So although the information given was interesting and enlightening, I think that the more important part of the whole program was the witness to the spirit of unity and camaraderie among the various denominations that pervaded the time together. On Wednesday night, for me, then, Paul's words from his letter to the Corinthians came alive: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." These words point to one of the tenets that unites the various members of the Chagrin Valley Council of Churches, and that is that we hold in common recognition of one baptism. In this sacrament, we believe we all drink of the same spirit.

Bainbridge Community United Church of Christ is one of the members of this council, which is made up of ten area Catholic and Protestant churches. In case you aren't aware of what we do, we meet regularly to share and plan events and programs for the good of the community. We sponsor various ecumenical programs and prayer services, as well as food and clothing drives. The Lenten soup suppers and discussions coming up next month are part of the efforts of the council. The newest project the council hopes to launch is a program called "Mindful Mondays," in which we hope area restaurants will take a portion of the proceeds from meals bought on Mondays to donate to hunger centers. So despite our different beliefs, we come together as members of the body of Christ and work together.

I feel very privileged to be a part of that ecumenical group, but especially to be representing the United Church of Christ. Because while I believe that we are called to all respect each other's traditions, at the same time, we also try to find the church which best reflects our own deepest beliefs. I have just celebrated my five year anniversary of being part of this denomination, and it was great experience for me to review what I have learned about the UCC in preparation for my part of the presentations on Wednesday night.

There are people here who have been a part of this denomination for a very long time, maybe even from its start, a little over fifty years ago. I love that the UCC is a denomination that formed, not because a group broke apart from the church, but rather that it was formed by churches coming together. In fact, the motto of the United Church of Christ is "That they may all be one."

Having been formed only about fifty years ago, we are a fairly new mainline protestant denomination. In 1957 the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the Congregational Christian Churches, came together to form the United Church of Christ. Each of those denominations was also the result of denominations coming together. For this reason, although we are young, we have preserved portions of heritage and history dating back to the 16th century. At the same time, we believe that God is still speaking and we listen to that voice in moving forward into our future.

I think that one place the UCC really exemplifies what Paul's letter talks about is in its vision that every single person has an important role. The UCC has always been on the cutting edge of living out its conviction that those who are seen by society as perhaps lesser, or not as valuable, should be raised up. Paul says: the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, . . . God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

There are many examples in our heritage to show how we have lived this out. In the early 1700's, Congregationalists, our forerunners, were among the first Americans to take a stand against slavery. In 1785, they ordained the first African American in a

Protestant denomination, and in 1853, the first woman since New Testament times. In 1972, our denomination ordained the first openly gay person as a minister in a mainline Protestant denomination. These historic show that we have a tradition of recognizing that every member is equally important, and has the same right as any other to answer their call.

What I also like is that the UCC affirms the responsibility of the local church to make faith its own in its worship and beliefs. When I first started coming to the UCC, I had no idea just how autonomous the local congregations were. I came from the Catholic church, where the hierarchy of power starts at the top with the Pope, then moves down through Archbishops, bishops, priests, and lastly the individual parishes. In the UCC, the hierarchy is just the opposite. In the Catholic church, when the Pope or the council of bishops speaks, all Catholic churches listen. In the UCC, when the general synod speaks, well ... we're all urged to listen, but it's still the decision of each congregation whether or not to incorporate the resolutions passed into their worship and beliefs. Just as Paul recognizes the individual gifts of each part that work together, so we are also encouraged to be individual congregations, working together in this world to bring forth the Realm of God.

I am grateful to be a part of this denomination. It is also my privilege to be part of this local church, have this experience of being part of the Bainbridge Community United Church of Christ. Here is where I can witness to the working together of the individuals as the body of Christ. As members, I have seen the great care you have for each other, and also your care for the world at large. In this congregation, we pray together, sharing our joys and concerns. We take to heart Paul's words - if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. It is because of this that in this church, we go beyond prayer into deeds. Over and over, when there is someone who has needs, a member will rise to the occasion and take care of them. You truly use your gifts for the good of the community. Each and every one here has a gift to give. It is important for us, as a church, that we continue to use these gifts, and also to look for, affirm, and encourage the gifts we see in each other.

We understand that the gifts may change over time. Just as we grow and change as individuals, and our gifts grow and change, so the church grows and changes because it is made up of individual members.

We can see this in looking back at the roots of the UCC, which date to the sixteenth century. We can see this in looking back at the roots of Bainbridge Community Church, which date back to the mid nineteenth century. We've done a lot of changing along the way. And just as we try to listen to God's voice all along our own personal faith journeys, as a church, and as a denomination, we have done our best to be faithful to the voice of God as well. We continue to be open to where that voice will lead.

It's not always easy being part of a greater body, being part of a changing body, but it is the ultimate way we live our calling as Christians. Dennis Ormseth of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary writes this: "The church is a living, changing body, an evolving structure selected so as to be God's epiphany in the public space of every time and place . . . And yet, as changed as it may become, the church is still always the body of Christ."

May we as individuals seek to know and to embrace our own particular function in the body of Christ. May we continue to work within our local church, our denomination, and in unity with other Christian churches. In this way, may we make known the love and light of Christ to our world. Amen.