

“One Body, One Faith, One Spirit”

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Most of the time, a community gathers whenever and wherever there is food. This came to life at yesterday's Annual Ecumenical Breakfast. But it's not just food on the table that makes a community. There are also stories around the table that feed the spirit, laughter that brings joy, presence that makes one feel important. As a former member of the United Methodist Church and now a United Church minister, I was delighted to sit with a Roman Catholic, an Anglican, a former Presbyterian and some members of the United Church. The annual breakfast will never be called ecumenical if we do not recognize the contributions and presence of many people from diverse Christian backgrounds and denominations. Certainly, its joys and successes were due to the many hands and hearts who made it happen. The breakfast proved once more that diversity indeed is a gift because though we are different in terms of beliefs and backgrounds, we are one body with one common goal: to work together in the name of love, community, compassion, justice and healing as modeled to us by Jesus.

The world had changed. Ages ago, my dad told me of a story when he was growing up in the Philippines, of how the Roman Catholics and the Protestants, particularly the Methodists, mistreat each other due to their religious beliefs and doctrinal differences. Each group claimed to be Christians and yet, they were like enemies, ready to cut each other's throats. In the late 50's until late '60's, a weekly debate in the city square, we call "plaza" was organized involving the Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Parish in the city where my dad lived. Each church was represented by their best debaters and speakers, theologian wannabes and lay leaders. A list of topics written on pieces of paper were placed inside a box and the moderator will draw what topic to be debated. Most of the themes centred on sacraments like baptism or communion, others on doctrines like resurrection, or the Virgin birth or life after death. Heated debates according to my dad always ended up in a fight. Some members of the groups brought with them not only Bibles or theological books but guess what – they also brought with them boxing gloves. And after the so called "healthy" and heated debates, many of them stay overnight in the city jail! I shared this story with those who were with me at the ecumenical breakfast table and I laughed with these closing comments: "That's why perhaps the Philippines

is famous for world boxers like Pacquiao – because the Filipinos were trained very well through the churches!”

In the year 54 CE, Paul wrote to a very diverse congregation of Corinth. Last Sunday, I preached on the word diversity as a gift - an issue addressed by Paul when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth. This dysfunctional church was at each other’s throats, was breaking apart due to severe factionalism, serious class and economic divisions, sexual immorality, gender issues and spiritual arrogance. Paul reminds the Corinthians that yes - there is diversity in the Body of Christ, a living, growing, dynamic diversity manifested by a variety of spiritual gifts, all of them demanding their own kinds of expression, all of them needing to be exercised, to develop and grow. But he also reminds them that to flourish as a diverse congregation, they must embrace and put to practice the words unity and interdependence. Paul uses the human body as a metaphor. The adult human body is made up of 206 bones, 609 muscles, 230 joints, 22 organs, and trillions of cells. Think of how many parts are there in this amazing body and how they work together. Every time we see things and people around us; every moment we hear a sound; every minute we breathe; every time we gather to eat; or those times we take a step, hundreds of the body’s muscles, ligaments, and cells are at work. The human body is like a machine, Susan Young says in our lectionary group last Tuesday, each nut and bolt, each lever, pulley, each screw are important for the machine to operate. And if one of the screws or plugs breaks, the machine will malfunction or worse it breaks down. Just like the human body. Just like a faith community.

A church, like a human body, is composed of many parts. One individual may be a hand, or a foot, a heart, an eye, an ear. Not all members can be nose, or mouth or brain. Each one has its functions, gifts, strengths and weaknesses. And to be part of a church body that flourishes means to live with, to be in sync, to work with, to respect and honour what each member offers and appreciate what one can contribute, to bring about some kind of harmony with the other members of the body. If one suffers, the whole body suffers. If one is joyful, the whole body celebrates. This is what we call interdependence. "We are bound together in an invisible, unfathomable web of relationships." This is the theory of the Butterfly Effect. "Every time a butterfly beats its wings, every time a cat yawns or a baby sneezes, the whole web shifts to

accommodate it.” When one is affected, the whole body trembles. The different body parts are not at odds with one another. Each part exists to complement and work together for the common good, for the well-being and health of the body. Not to compete, but to complement. We can hear Paul in his booming voice speaking to us today: "What good is a hand without an eye? Or a head without a foot? You are the body of Christ and individually members of it. You are all baptized into one body through the same Spirit. And the good news is this: through this one faith that we profess, there is no more distinctions between Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, female or male.” We even can add to the list. No more distinctions between black or white, Muslims or Christians, Methodists or Anglicans, conservatives or liberals, young or old – we were all made to drink of one Spirit. One body, one faith, one spirit. What on earth are you talking about Paul? How does this work, we may ask, when in fact, there are thousands of religions and even Christian denominations in the world, add to that atheists and agnostics- each one claiming an absolute truth? Will we ever attain unity and interdependence?

Bob was walking alone one night; out by the bridge that crosses the river on the outskirts of the city. As he came up on the bridge, he saw a man standing on it as if he was ready to jump off the railing. Bob was concerned that the man might be trying to take his own life; and thought that if he started talking and found something in common; perhaps the other man would change his mind and decide to live. “Tell me something,” said Bob, “are you a religious person?” “Yes, I am,” the man replied; “Good, so am I,” said Bob. “Are you a Christian, a Jewish a Muslim, a Buddhist?” asked Bob; “I’m a Christian,” the man said. “Good,” said Bob, “so am I.” “Are you a Protestant Christian or a Roman Catholic Christian?” The man answered, “I am a Protestant Christian.” “Good,” said Bob, “so am I. “Do you belong to the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian, the Baptist Church or the United Church?” “I belong to the United Church,” replied the man on the railing. “Good,” said Bob, “so do I.” “Are you conservative, liberal, progressive, agnostic or spiritual but not religious United Church member?” The man, now very interested said, “I am a liberal United Church member.” “Good,” said Bob, “so am I.” “As a United Church liberal member, which creed do you recite – the Apostles Creed, the New Creed or the Song of Faith? “Why, I subscribe to the Song of Faith of course.” Really! said Bob, go and die – you heretic!

To be the body of Christ is not easy task but it is not impossible to attain. Yes, we are diverse in many ways but when we work together, when we listen to each other, when we argue with grace, when we say an honest no than an empty yes, then we are in the process of becoming the body of Christ – a tangible expression of God’s hospitality to an aching, hurting, seemingly hopeless world. In this body of authentic followers of Jesus, we have the capacity to be our individual selves, differences and all, while remaining connected. We come together in search of meaning in our lives, in our growth, in our relationships. To be in this body of diverse individuals is to be in a place where we are known, accepted, loved, where we can experience a sense of belonging despite our differences. How do we do this? Open communication is essential. To listen with one’s heart. To appreciate and honour the many gifts and talents of every individual. To acknowledge that there are those who are greater or lesser than yourself and remain humble. To be the body of Christ is not a one-time deal - it is an evolving process. Kathleen Norris writes in her book *Amazing Grace*, on her reflection on what it is to be the church: "We are not individuals who have come together because we are like-minded. That is not a church but a political party. We are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other, and the world: but God help us if we have to agree about things...The church is like the incarnation itself, a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who do and say cruel things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes of a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the Body of Christ." (pp. 272-3).

How can we be the body of Christ? How do we make this body become alive here at BCUC and outside the walls of this building? How should we treat each other so that our vision of being the body of Christ in the world is made relevant and radical? How do we show that we are interdependent with each other in building God’s *kin-dom* here on earth? Today, we have welcomed 10 new members to our congregation. For five years that I have been your minister, I am proud to say that our congregation here at BCUC is a living proof that we can all get along, despite our different backgrounds, opinions and traditions. We can hold different theological beliefs and argue about them, and still be unified in our common vision to serve others in the

name of love, justice and compassion. I think this is the part of what makes us one body, one faith, one spirit.

I was on my way to pouring me a second cup of tea at yesterday's ecumenical breakfast when two elderly women approached the same table as I did. One woman was visually impaired and couldn't see very well. So she asked the other woman which one of the two containers is coffee and sighed: "Oh I wish I could see better then I won't be asking a lot from you." The other woman said to her: "yes, you can't see very well but boy, you do a lot for this church. It's alright. No need to feel sorry. I will be your eyes. Here's the coffee. I'll pour you a cup." I left the table with a smile on my face. Now that's the body of Christ Paul was talking about. Thanks be to God. Amen.