

Body and Soul

A Morning Message for Worship on Annual Meeting Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
January 31, 2016
Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

So often when we pick up the Bible, we approach it as something important to us, surely, but also removed from us in many ways. The words and sentences sound strange, describing people and situations that seem far distant from the lives we live each day. Our understanding of the Bible as sacred is difficult to explain to ourselves or anyone else. We approach the Bible almost fearfully or we put it on a pedestal removed from ourselves and our lives and in doing so we take away its ability to inspire, comfort and reassure us. Still others of us struggle with the awful stories of bloody conquest in the Bible. Those combined with some of the crazy statements it contains are just too far removed from how we think of our loving, compassionate God.

Questions about the Bible – what it is, what it says, what it means, who wrote it and why, how it came to us at this moment in time and what we are supposed to do with it – are real questions for us, and even more so for the people outside our doors. And it is those people, we all know, whom we must reach if we hope to grow our church. That's why it is so important that we know the Bible and what its role is in our own lives and the life and ministry of this church. We have to know who we are as the people of God

in this place and we must be able to explain that to the others we hope will join us if we are going to see more people sitting with us here on Sunday mornings and any time we gather as the people of God. If we can't do that, if we can't talk about our faith and what it means to us, the Bible and what it means to us and why it matters to us, then people won't know. Worse than that, they'll do what we all do when we think we know something but we really don't – they'll provide their own answers to themselves, and those answers will most likely be wrong.

Knowing the Bible, understanding the Bible, loving the Bible is the central part of Sunday worship. In truth the Bible is our roadmap for learning and exploring what it means to be a person of faith. It is a unique and incredible storehouse of insights and information, a true gift from God, reflecting literally thousands of years of people's experiences with God. The Bible is – nothing more and nothing less – a written record of thousands of years of people's experiences of and with God and how they made sense of it for themselves in their own time. The challenge for us then becomes to take those stories, that insight, that ancient person's experience of God, and connect it to our own lives.

I wanted to take some time this morning to explain all this as a foundation to our on-going conversation about the Apostle Paul and his understanding of the church. Paul sees the church as the gathered people of God whose relationship with God has been

forever changed by Jesus Christ. Paul was a Jew and a Roman citizen, a very different background than the 11 surviving disciples who lived and worked with Jesus during his ministry on earth. The 11 were a ragtag bunch, mostly illiterate and poor, and definitely on the very margins of society. Paul, in contrast, was well educated, well placed economically and within the Roman Empire. What Paul had in common with the 11 disciples was a deep and profound life changing experience of Jesus and the resulting role of an Apostle – one known by Jesus Christ and sent by Jesus to spread the Word. What made him different from them was that his personal experience of Jesus came as a result of a literally blinding encounter of the Risen Christ from which he emerged transformed from persecutor to apostle. The course of human history and the evolution of Christianity changed too in that moment of Paul's conversion which is why he is such a central figure in the New Testament even though he was not one of the original twelve. His letters to church leaders throughout the Mediterranean world of his day are the best account we have of how the teachings of Jesus evolved from a localized, small time religious curiosity into the world religion Christianity is today.

Paul's letters to the earliest churches provide us with a unique insight and wisdom into how church needs to be church if the Gospel of Jesus is to survive into succeeding generations. That is precisely why they still speak so powerfully to us today as

we face the reality of a society and a world in which fewer people than ever before are formally connected with a church. While not as openly hostile as the environment in which Paul and those early churches found themselves, ours is a world where being a Christian is not always something we proclaim to others as routinely as we once might have. Too many claiming the name Christian have said too much that is mean and hurtful to others different from themselves. Their negativity has tainted us adding to the challenge of growing this or any Christian church. That's just a fact. But, where to go from here? How do we move forward in the face of skepticism and even open hostility for the truth of Jesus we know and have experienced? How do we become the people Jesus needs us to be, the church God is calling us to be, in our 21st century realities?

Enter our good friend Paul who has some wisdom to share with us in his letter to the church in Corinth. He wrote this letter to the leaders of that ancient church to help them sort through and figure out their own answers to that same question – how do we become the people and the church God needs us to be in our time and place? Paul's answer to this question is found in part in the text we read this morning, a very familiar one in which he uses the human body as a metaphor for the church.

“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.” That’s pretty straight forward, we think. Yes, our human bodies are made up of many “members” as Paul calls them. We think of them as limbs and organs but it’s the same thing. And we know that our limbs and organs have very different functions but it’s how they work together that make us human. We get that. That’s why this is one of those biblical texts we tend to rush through. We get it, we think. The problem with that is that this text’s real significance becomes visible when we realize Paul was actually taking a metaphor in very common usage in the Roman Empire he lived in, and standing it on its head precisely to proclaim the new life Jesus promised. Let me explain.

The body metaphor of ancient Rome was used not to emphasis commonality or the importance of working together to achieve a common task. It was not used to emphasize the human body as a gift from God with all its imperfections and shortcomings. Instead, in ancient Rome, the human body was used to symbolize the Empire itself in a very specific and hierarchal way. In the Roman body metaphor, the head and the belly were always portrayed as the superior parts of the body to which all the more “inferior” members were to be subservient. The hands and feet and mouth only had value because they served the needs of the head and the belly. In other words, the Roman body metaphor meant that common people – the hands and feet of the empire – only had value because they served the wealthy

ruling class – the head and the belly. No sense of working together for the common good at all. And rebellion of the common people was foolish, the metaphor taught, because rebellion would kill the head and the belly and the whole body of Rome would then die, including the lesser members.

Paul was saying exactly the opposite – a radical and dangerous message. He was saying that all the parts of the body were exactly the same and equally important. No part of the body was more important than any other! All parts of the body are necessary for the body to function. Paul is also saying that the differences in the body parts are what give the body its strength. Diversity and difference are key, he says! Each member of the body of Christ – and Paul sees the body metaphor for the church as exactly that, the church as the physical representation of the Risen Christ in the world every day – each member of the body is blessed with unique gifts and functions. Those differing gifts in the body then translate into a division of labor for the church to be what God needs it to be. Brilliantly Paul divides these diverse gifts into three broad categories corresponding to three types of service or ministries. First are those addressing our need to understand God and God’s desires for us – the apostles, prophets and teachers. Next are those addressing human physical need – what Paul calls “deeds of power,” miracles and healing. Finally, Paul recognized the need for people to organize the efforts of

those who engage in the first two, what we would call administration. He calls these forms of assistance, leadership and tongues. So, what we first hear as simple metaphor is in reality an organizational plan for the church to follow.

That's why Paul's metaphor still speaks to us today as we think about and plan for our own life together in our beloved UCC Westery. Apostles, prophets and teachers? Miracle workers? Those people serve on every board, committee and group we have. Sound impossible? Not really. The folks who can "see" what the building needs now and in the future? The people who can imagine changes we might make in worship, or in the mission and service opportunities we offer, or in the programming we offer to children, youth and adults? Those are our prophets. The people who can help us organize to do it and then explain the plans to other people? Those are our leaders. The people who know and live their faith each day and are willing to share that wisdom with others? Those are our teachers. The people who just jump in to offer assistance and support to others through word and prayer and action? Those are our miracle workers. The people willing to chat with anybody and everybody in person, online and any way which way about this church and how it strives to be the beacon of hope we claim to be, those are our folks who speak in tongues because their knowledge of the language of heaven is visible in everything they do and say.

So, dear friends, I'm here to tell you that we already have all Paul tells us we need to be God's church right here and right now. We have our challenges, certainly. But what body doesn't have its aches and pains? Those challenges are vitally important to our future because it is through our response to those challenges that we uncover our wisdom and unleash our strength. Aches and pains in the body don't mean the body is irretrievably unhealthy! It means the body needs to figure out what it needs to be restored to wholeness and then do it. Dear Friends, we ARE the body of Christ in this place in this moment of time and the only limits on us are the ones we put on ourselves. During today's Annual Meeting as we consider the reports of all that we have accomplished in the year just past and all that we hope to accomplish in the year ahead, we will see that! The truth is, dear friends, that we are apostles – those sent out by Christ into the world to proclaim the love of God, the new life in possible in Jesus and the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit in all we seek to do together. We are the body of Christ Paul described so long ago, and with God's help we will continue to be in the year ahead and for all the years to follow. So, what's next for us? I can't wait to find out! Amen.