

Embracing Diversity
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
January 27, 2019 – Third Sunday After The Epiphany

“Just as the body is one and has many members. . .so it is with Christ.” The Common English Bible translation is a little more straight-forward: “Christ is just like the human body.” I really like that metaphor. “Christ is just like the human body – a body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body.” Then Paul goes on to say: “We are all baptized by the same Spirit into the one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free.”

Reading this reminds me of another letter of Paul’s – to the churches of Galatia: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; but all are one in Christ Jesus.” I might go on to say that there is no longer young or old, rich or poor, gay or straight, black or white, citizen or immigrant. . . Can you think of any other classification that people sometimes use to divide us?

Friends, these writing of the Apostle Paul make it very clear – we are all part of the one body of Jesus Christ. We are all members of the Family of God; and indeed “all” means “all” – no exceptions. But when are we as a society, when are we as a community, when are we as a country going to learn that?

Through the month of February, we will be doing a worship series very loosely based on Bryan Stevenson’s book *Just Mercy*. Stevenson is an African American trial lawyer who volunteered to work for a very meager salary representing death row inmates in the deep south. As Stevenson states, “What Capital Punishment means is that those without the capital get the punishment.” Now, it may be no surprise to you that I am categorically opposed to capital punishment in *all* circumstances. It may be news to you that the United Methodist Church stands opposed to capital punishment in all circumstances. From the United Methodist Book of Discipline:

We believe the death penalty denies the power of Christ to redeem, restore, and transform all human beings. . . We believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and that the possibility of reconciliation with Christ comes through repentance. This gift of reconciliation is offered to all individuals without exception and gives all life new dignity and sacredness. For this reason, we oppose the death penalty and urge its elimination from all criminal codes.”
(United Methodist Book of Discipline ¶164g)

In his book, Stevenson points out the injustices wielded in this country based on race and economic status. Indeed, a very large percentage of inmates on death row are poor and/or black; and that's not because all capital crimes are committed by poor blacks.

But the book is not just about Capital Punishment. In it, Stevenson tells of having been pulled over by an Atlanta SWAT unit outside his apartment in a mostly white residential area of Atlanta. He was illegally searched, and verbally harassed, simply because he was an African American on the street late at night. He speaks of his fear of having a gun waved in his face. He speaks of how the "fight and flight" response kicked in for him; and what might have happened if he had followed that instinct and ran instead of simply cooperating.

Friends, I stated last week that I am deeply concerned by the increasing presence, or maybe it's just the increasing openness of white supremacist hate groups in our country. It seems that groups like the Ku Klux Klan have been emboldened by our current political climate. These groups don't believe that we are all members of God's family, or that *all* means *all*.

I'm very pleased to say that race is no longer a division in United Methodism. It was 2013, as I was taking a bicycle trip from Nashville, Tennessee to Natchez, Mississippi that I found myself in a church in rural Alabama. There I met a white family who had adopted an African American child; and I was thrilled to witness how that church in Alabama embraced that family. Such was not the case in our denomination prior to 1968, when Methodist Churches that were predominately African American belonged to a separate Central Jurisdiction whereby the church would hold a "separate but equal" stand. Praise God, that division was eliminated in 1968 when the Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church to form the United Methodist Church.

Still, today, we are a church divided – divided over the issue of sexuality. Our discipline holds that homosexuals are welcome in our churches. It specifically states that they are members of the family of God. But, you see, today our denomination does not hold LGBTQ individuals as full and equal members in the body of Christ. LGBTQ individuals are welcome in our church, but don't ask to be married here, and certainly don't ever seek ordination. Such homophobic rules have been a divisive issue in our denomination for decades; and, to their credit, our Council of Bishops is seeking to bring an end to the division.

A special General Conference of the United Methodist Church has been called for February 23-26 in Saint Louis, Missouri to wrestle with and hopefully resolve this issued in a way to at least move toward equality for all God's children. A special commission has been meeting for the past eighteen months, and has come up with three possible solutions for General Conference consideration. I can't go into all those details here, but they are available on our conference

website; and they will be outlined in the next Agape newsletter. Today, I simply ask for your prayers. Pray that we may be a church united as the body of Christ with all its members.

Friends, I embrace diversity. I embrace diversity in people. I have tried to imagine a world where everyone looked alike, acted alike, behaved alike, had the same interests, skills, and abilities. When I think of that, I imagine a very boring world. I also imagine a world that could not survive, for we would all have the same strengths, yes; but we would also all have the same weaknesses. And those weaknesses would be our downfall.

I note that there are two types of leaders. There are the leaders who seek to surround themselves with people that think just like they do, people who will not oppose decisions, and people who will be the proverbial “Yes” men. And there are the leaders who embrace diversity, who welcome differing opinions, who encourage healthy debate on issues, who recognize the strength of diversity. I would argue that the latter makes a stronger leader as all aspects of every issue is considered; and, friends, I tell you, we have leaders in Washington on both sides of the aisle who could stand to learn this fact.

Several years ago, as a relatively new Associate Pastor, I preached a sermon, and a member of the congregation took serious issue with some of the things I said. My senior pastor told me, “Mark, you don’t deserve that. It was a good sermon. You should not need to deal with that kind of conflict.” I replied, “Don’t apologize. First of all, if he disagreed, I know he was listening. Second, this provided another teaching moment for me; as I was further able to explain myself. And third, it also provided a learning moment for me. I was able to better understand the differing opinion; and I was able to possibly ‘find some common ground’ on the issue at hand.”

So back to Paul. . . Paul states that, while we are all part of the body of Christ, we are indeed all different. Some of us are eyes and some ears, some noses and some mouths, some arms others legs or feet. Still we are all important. We are all members in the body of Christ, and the body needs each and every member. The twelfth chapter of First Corinthians concludes with Paul listing and embracing the many and varied gifts of his congregation. And then he says: Strive for the greater gifts; and I will show you a still more excellent way.

Next week, we’ll consider that more excellent way, as we examine the gift of agape love.

Let us pray. . .

Holy Lord,
Help us accept each other.
Help us embrace each other,
 as we celebrate our diversity.
Help us love each other
 as you first loved us.
Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
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