

Members of the Body

I Corinthians 12: 4-27

The imagery of the church as a body is one of the Apostle Paul's favourite images. There are other examples in Ephesians 4 and Romans 12, always picking on this idea of an organism that works together and inter-connectedly and inter-dependently.

What we don't realize is that it was common in Greco Roman times to use the image of a body as a way reinforce hierarchy, as a way to show that one person or function is more important than another. And so in using this image Paul is being subversive of an image that was used to justify power of one over the other to show the importance of the parts that we don't think are important. That is often how we have thought about the Body of Christ when we bring these passages into our reflections.

But this time when I read the passage in 1 Corinthians I kept on hearing the part about the unity of the body, rather than about how my little part is important. I heard the part of what the goal is: to bring it all together as one body functioning together.

In the Ephesians 4 passage there's a little piece of the image that I find very fascinating. *"But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, **joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.***

I love the emphasis in Ephesians about the connections and the ligaments, about how it is about the knitting together of the body is what makes it function as a body. It's a fascinating metaphor.

The more we learn about bodies the more interesting the metaphor becomes.

- I remember a friend who had a sprained ankle, didn't think much of it. But years later she needed a hip replacement because that ankle hadn't been treated properly.
- Someone was telling me recently about how they are finding connections between the vagus nerve – which goes to all our major organs – and memory. There are studies where they stimulate the vagus nerve to treat epilepsy, or study how it might be related to Alzheimers.

Fascinating.

And then there is what I experienced last night, the birth of my next granddaughter! I bring this to mind because I imagine that the apostle Paul probably never had the opportunity to witness a birth. If he had, this metaphor would be even richer for him.

A birth is a horrible wonderful thing. There is something so primal and so unstoppable and so system-wide that a body goes through in delivering a child. There are so many transitions and all kinds of things happening and what comes at the end of it is a new body, a new life and it's a beautiful thing. I think that Paul missed an opportunity to talk about how bodies create newness, how we create things too, we don't just walk around.

So I started thinking about us reflecting on Being Church Together and I went to our Vision Statement and I tried to find what it is that we think that we're doing. More importantly, what is that little piece that could be a stand-in for what we are trying to birth.

So here's what our Vision Statement says:

Here's some of what TUMC's Vision statement says:

We claim as our own and share the broader vision of Mennonite Church Canada:

God calls us to be followers of Jesus Christ

And, by the power of the Holy Spirit

To grow as communities of grace, joy and peace

So that God's healing and hope

Flow through us to the world.

TUMC's purpose is to be an Anabaptist-Mennonite community of faith united in a call and desire to follow Jesus in life.

To grow as communities of grace, joy and peace

So that God's healing and hope

Flow through us to the world.

In listening to the Spirit of God as heard in congregational conversation we have identified several core values and statements that give shape to the identity of TUMC. TUMC is:

home,

community,

worship and music,

spiritual formation and transformation,

diversity and hospitality,

service, peace and justice,

in service of our primary call to follow Jesus in life.

To grow as communities of grace, joy and peace

So that God's healing and hope

Flow through us to the world.

We welcome people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, faith backgrounds, physical capacities, [neuro-diversity] and gifts. Although we don't always agree with one another, we

share a belief in Christ and a desire to be his followers. We invite others to journey with us as we strive to live with integrity and to be a just and faithful Christian community.

***To grow as communities of grace, joy and peace
So that God's healing and hope
Flow through us to the world.***

...

We are committed to lives of discipleship, faithfulness and discernment in community and welcome theological diversity among us.

***To grow as communities of grace, joy and peace
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That is what we are supposed to be pregnant with, that healing that flows to the world.

It's not all easy and beautiful.

You will remember a couple of Sundays ago I talked about our perfectly imperfect body, church.

Last week Pieter talked about the political tensions are part of being church together. That following Jesus needs to make a difference in a flesh and bone, He reminded us that God's reckless love invites us into Love's transforming power.

Coming up next weekend we have a workshop about Communion. This is one of the core practices of the broader ecumenical church. Spoiler alert: we gather in Communion to remember Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we use it as a touchstone, a reminder Christ's love, a reminder of our commitment to live a life, as I've said in previous sermons, "under the influence" of God's Spirit – which often, most often, comes to us through each other. The influence of God's Spirit most often comes to us through each other.

In Mennonite/Anabaptist circles and others communion has been very much linked to the idea of baptism and church membership because we can't imagine separating a commitment to follow Jesus from a community that would support us in doing so. So I thought we should think a bit about church membership before we go into reflecting on Communion.

Things are changing in our world in terms of how people express commitments to institutions, to "belief systems". We now know that absolute certainty about things, especially about our own perspective about being right, can be a dangerous thing. And so we are hesitant to become members of anything – expect maybe fitness centres, because we believe in what they promise, and we've given them our money! ☺

These days we also carry our convictions more lightly, more humbly. We are more humble about our perspective as Christians in the world because we've seen the damage it does to think that you're the only one that is ever right. We tend to think of our faith more in terms of a

journey, as an unfolding, as a growing; more like a body that grows and develops into understanding organically.

One of the obstacles I find to people becoming church members, is this idea that “I just don’t believe in those things in that way like everybody else does.” My response to that is twofold. One is to understand that faith and doubt are two sides of the same coin. If doubt wasn’t there it would be certainty, not faith. That’s what faith is, it’s a bit of a gamble, we are in that together, and we are helping each other together. (Maybe gamble is not the right word)

Believing – even in the Bible – is much closer to putting your trust in something than to intellectually acquiescing to every little detail. People have tried for centuries to pin it down. We have creed statements going back to the 4th Century – and it is a helpful exercise. But we fall into the trap of thinking that you have to believe exactly that exactly as it is said or else you’re not a good Christian, or not even a Christian.

I turn to Mennonite theologian, Jim Reimer who loved creeds. He had a wonderful gracious way of understanding the creeds. He said that the creeds are for those times when you let the faith of your community carry you. Maybe you can say part of it and your community helps you to say the rest. Maybe you can say all of it and you’re helping someone who is having a doubt in that one area in that particular time.

We don’t all think the same – thanks be to God – what is the same is the Spirit that brings us together, and helps us to birth:

***[The growing of] communities of grace, joy and peace
So that God’s healing and hope
Flow through us to the world.***

And that is why it is worthwhile to make the commitment to be a member and to follow along and to have help in believing.

Therese of Avila has a wonderful poem based on the idea of the church being a body in the world.

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but [ours].*