

"We Are the Church Together"  
July 10, 2016  
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church  
Rev. Tim Berlew

While I was serving Trinity United Methodist Church in Grand Rapids during my church musician days, I had the opportunity to conduct Johann Sebastian Bach's *Magnificat* with orchestra, choir, and soloists. When we see busts and pictures of Bach, he looks to be a sour-faced old man. In fact, though, he had a wonderful sense of humor. The final movement of the *Magnificat* is a setting of the "Gloria Patri": "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen." When the chorus gets to the text, "As it was in the beginning" it is as if someone hit the replay button and the orchestra launches into the music at the beginning of the first movement – "As it was in the beginning!" Imagine getting caught in a loop that takes you back to the beginning over and over. It would be kind of like the movie, *Groundhog Day*. In Natalie Sleeth's beautiful "Hymn of Promise," which is found in our hymnal, we hear the text, "In the end is our beginning." Our lives are a series of endings and new beginnings. You, as a congregation, have just ended eight productive years of serving in ministry with Pastor Sue Burwell, and now you are beginning a new era of ministry with me. As much as things change, there are also things that stay perennially the same. Our mission as a congregation has not changed, though the church and the world are changing constantly and quickly, and the way in which we complete the mission of the church is ever-changing.

I chose to use readings other than the ones prescribed by the Revised Common Lectionary for my last week at Kenosha First and this, my first week at Tosa Avenue. They are the same readings for both places. I did this, not to save time, because while the two sermons have some common features, they are fundamentally different. I did it because, "In the end is our beginning," and there is much that connects endings in one place and new beginnings in another.

Paul has given us a beautiful metaphor of the church as a human body. He squeezed about as much out of that metaphor in this passage from 1 Corinthians as he could. There are some things that it is helpful to know about that church at Corinth. First of all, Corinth was the Vegas of its day. "What happens in Corinth stays in Corinth." While it was a wonderful, cosmopolitan city, it was also pretty seedy in some places. You could find most any kind of debauchery for which you might look. The church in Corinth had some Jewish Christians, but consisted mostly of Gentile converts. Most of the church members were socially humble. There were even slaves in the congregation. There was a fairly wide socio-economic scope to the church, which included Erastus, the city treasurer, but most were of lesser means. Nevertheless, the diversity of means was a cause for friction. Those of means arrived at the church potlucks while the

laboring class was still at work. Some overate while others were left hungry. It was a mixed-gender group and women were fully involved in the life of the church. The church was probably somewhere between 40 and 150 members, so it was not a “house” church. When the whole church came together for worship they would have had to rent a dining hall, a large garden, or some other venue. The church at Corinth maintained friendly relations with outsiders. Christianity at Corinth did not seem to be particularly subversive. In fact, the church was a bit too closely aligned to the dominant culture for Paul’s taste.

All that being said, Paul’s metaphor of the human body is a call for unity. The Spirit is what binds them together, and yet, they seem to suffer from division. That is why Paul talks about the greater and lesser members of the body. He calls for the greater members, the more powerful leader-types, to have more respect for those who are not the “stand outs.” He reminds them that there is a need for all of the members. If they were not all there, some function of the body would be left out. We know in our own physical bodies that when one function is compromised, we quickly become ill.

This body of Christ works on at least three different levels. First of all, we as the local church are the body of Christ, just as the church at Corinth was the body of Christ. We have many members who look and think and act differently. Yet, we as the church are one. Paul called for unity, not uniformity. We all have a place, no matter what our economic status, no matter what our cultural background, no matter what our theological stance, and, especially this year, no matter what our political party.

I suppose we need to touch briefly on politics and the church. In our time, there is great polarization in political life. The most important thing does not seem to be to work together, but to win. It has thwarted our ability to listen and to compromise. It is just that sort of thing that Paul was talking about with the Corinthian church. People worry about the politics of their pastors. I have some good news for you. This year, more than any other presidential cycle in the past, I can stand far back from it. I’m so unimpressed with both major parties’ offerings of candidates that you need not fear an agenda there from me! However, as the church, we are called to deal with issues of justice. We read about this throughout scripture. Sometimes people hear these issues as political. In a way, I suppose they are because the word “politics” comes from the Greek word “polis” which merely means “the gathered people.” Wherever people gather to talk, there is politics involved. Once again, we are called to unity, not uniformity. You will not always agree with me – and that’s a good thing. I will at times press and push you, not to make you change your mind or make you angry, but to make you think. I promise you it will always be done in love. The outcome may well be that you are more sure and more articulate in what you already believe. Great! You may end up understanding other people’s points of view better. Who knows, on a rare occasion, you might even change your mind! This type of conversation must be done in an attitude of what Wesley called “holy conferencing.”

Why do we have to have such difficult conversations? We do it because we have work to do in the world and in order to discern God's will we must look at our society from all angles. Everything we do as the local church is about making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. That means we are working with God as co-creators of the kingdom of God. "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

As United Methodists, we are part of a larger connection. We are part of a district, an annual conference, a jurisdiction, and ultimately, the general worldwide United Methodist Church. As members of this larger connection, we are able to do things we could never do as an individual congregation. The Imagine No Malaria campaign, which this congregation has supported, is a great example. The world is a better place when people are not dying due to a mosquito bite. Malaria threatens half the world's population and kills half a million people every year – mostly children and pregnant women. Since 2000, malaria mortality rates have dropped by 58% - mostly due to the work of the United Methodist Church. Our Wisconsin Annual Conference had a goal of raising 1 million dollars for the Imagine No Malaria campaign. As of the end of this year's annual conference, we oversubscribed that campaign, raising \$1,023,960. Even more has come in since mid-June. Since many of those who were dying were children, what is to become of all these children who are saved? The United Methodist Church came up with an answer to that question, too. We built and support Africa University, where students go from villages and cities all over Africa to get an education. Many return home and are resources for a healthier and better way of life for the people of their villages. Some of these graduates are doing amazing things. They are transforming lives. Everything we are about as the local body of Christ or the worldwide body of Christ is about making a difference. That is in our DNA.

The third manifestation of the body of Christ is when the many denominations come together in ministry. When we work together with Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Catholics, and others, we are the body of Christ to the world. That body even extends to some of the interfaith experiences we have. We are not called to be isolationists.

So, what is this "as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be," and this "in the end is our beginning" all about? As United Methodists and as part of the universal church we have a long, colorful, and rather amazing history. Certainly, it has had its high points and its low points. Every once in a while the body of Christ has caught the flu, or worse. We know that there are times when things get difficult. Our international church is having a hard time right now. But, when we work together as a healthy organism, we do, indeed, become co-creators of God's kingdom.

In the very last verse of chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, the chapter from which today's epistle reading comes, we read, "And I will show you a still more excellent way." From

here, Paul launches into 1 Corinthians 13, which we know as the “Love Chapter.” In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus describes love as the “glue” that holds the body together. It doesn’t sound that monumental or new, but he says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Jesus gives this new commandment after he has given them an example of the type of love he means. As he washes their feet, he is behaving as the servant of a master giving welcome – providing hospitality. Then he calls for them to offer that same hospitality to each other and to all people. The love which holds the church together is a love that is totally about the other. It’s not about us.

I have been a part of the body of Christ for a long time. Some of you have been a part of the body far longer. I was at my last church for 5 years. I have served the body of Christ in Wauwatosa for about a week. The point is, we are a part of something huge and wonderful and productive and life-changing. I know what I have been part of in the past. I know the excitement of working with others to do the ministry of loving God and neighbor. I only have an inkling of what you and I might do together through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

As we see the violence in our world – especially the violence of this past week in Baton Rouge, St. Paul, and Dallas – we know, more and more, the church needs to play a part as peacemakers. In a time when we are torn apart as a nation, we can look to others who have made a difference. I want to conclude with a quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu who had a major role in dismantling apartheid in South Africa.

We are made for goodness.

We are made for love.

We are made for friendliness.

We are made for togetherness.

We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know.

We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders.

All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all.

We all belong to the family, this human family, God’s family.

Yes, friends...Yes We’re the Church Together.