

Worship: January 23, 2022-01-16

On-Line only

Thought for Meditation:

In the ancient world, rigid divisions between healers, poets, and spiritual leaders did not exist as they do today. Yet there remain fragments of the old unity, like sparks of the stars scattered throughout the world, that still shine with luminous joy, for they remember in body, bone, and blood that healing, and beauty, and spirituality point towards some shared home from which they all have journeyed.

Samuel Loncar

Welcome & Lighting of the Christ Candle:

Let us pause to remember that in this region we live and work and worship on lands that are, by law, the unceded territories of the Wabanaki peoples—predominantly the lands of the Mi'kmaq, Wolastoqiyik and the Passamaquoddy. May we live with respect on this land, and live in peace and friendship with its people.

Opening Prayer:

We come to this time, O God, from varied places, with all of our differences and opinions, with all of our gifts. In this time together, and in your midst, may we somehow become the messy wondrous body you call us to be. And so we pray saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
For ever and ever. Amen.**

HYMN: Deep In Our Hearts #154 MV

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2FRn3qK1JA&ab_channel=PacificSpiritUnitedChurch

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:12-20, 26-27

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. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.

And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.

If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?

If all were a single member, where would the body be?

As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

On the contrary...If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Sermon:

I remember 10 or 12 years ago there was a decision to replace the carpet here. The decision was really not that hard. The traditional red carpet was old and threadbare in places and a tripping hazard. Decision made. Technically though, that was Decision, Part 1. An evening rolled around soon after, where a group of us were called in to meet with Graham Kerr, not part of the church but a neighbour from the community who would be sourcing the carpet for us. He was to take measurements that night and get us to make Decision Part 2: what colour the carpet was to be.

When he walked into the sanctuary that evening he took one look at the crowd of us and said “Mercy, all of you are going to try and agree on the colour???”

He’d heard about church folk.

What we did decide was that it wasn’t going to be ‘the be all end all’ of us. We went for a serviceable sturdy neutral. Done.

But the funny part was, no could agree afterwards what the colour actually is. The first Sunday after it was installed, someone said “I like the new brown carpet.”

“What? No, it’s not brown, it’s grey.”

“Well, I’d call it kind of khaki, myself,” said another.

And just then Doug Price was walking by, and in his own inimitable way said, “well now, I’d say it’s the colour that won’t show the dirt much.”

Nods all around.

Which pretty much translates as: *And all God's people said Amen.*

Unity.

It is what seems to have been on Paul's mind when he wrote to the Church community gathered in Corinth.

All these differing parts, all these odd and wondrous bits and pieces – the parts that let us move (muscles)

and the parts that keep a beat (the heart)

and the parts that grow or stop growing (hello hair/goodbye hair)

are all somehow brought together into this *one*. Called a body.

Perhaps this reading sounds a little unusual for scripture?

Particularly when we realize it is accredited to Paul.

The most pious and penitential

and persnickiest of our theologians seems to have been having a fanciful moment.

He even places the body parts in a sort of philosophical dialogue with one another, the foot to the hand and the ear to the eye. “If I am not you, am I therefor, *not?*”

Good for him.

And a good reading it is for now, because January 18-25th is The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

This is an annual ecumenical celebration when Christians around the world join in worship

together, reflect on scripture together, that we might possibly find some kind of unity. Unity among the 45,000 [according to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity] different Christian denominations that exist worldwide. Week of Prayer for Christian Unity indeed! Or as it is otherwise known: The Week of Good Luck with That! We have had trouble getting along. Sometimes it seems we do better with another world religion than with one of our own members of the Body of Christ.

The church may have begun as one, but it didn't last. In 1054 the “Great Schism” occurred, that created the two largest denominations in Christianity—the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

Some 500 years after that, the Reformation altered the religious landscape again, leading to a further division and the emergence of Protestantism.

And thereafter, continual micro-schisms saw the emergence of more and more Protestant denominations. In Canada we are most familiar with the United Church of Canada, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Pentecostals; Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists. And then there are those that do not affiliate with any specific denomination, such as Bible churches or local community churches. And within these denominations there are “off shoot” churches cropping up.

The worst heresy of Protestants, we are sometimes told, is our tendency to schism...to split apart when we don't agree. There is an old Roman dig at us, that says "The ultimate Protestant church is the church of the individual." The Church of Bob is over here, and across the street is the Church of Sally. The Church of Joe sits kitty corner from the Church of Gladys.

And we hear Paul, saying: If all were a single member, where would the body be? There are many members, but one body.

It is one of the great mysteries of the faith.

When author and poet Kathleen Norris moved from New York City to her family's homestead in Lemmon, South Dakota, she found herself drawn to the church and thinking, for the first time in a very long while, about the Christian faith.

Ultimately, she became a member of a Presbyterian congregation there. She participated fully in the life of the congregation, served as a supply preacher on occasion, but also kept a curious eye on what she was experiencing.

From the outside, she said, church congregations can look like remarkably contentious places, full of hypocrites who talk about love while fighting each other. On the inside, however, it is a different matter, a matter of working intentionally to maintain some kind of unity as the body of Christ given the fact that we have precious little uniformity.

"I have only to look at the congregation I know best, the one I belong to. 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. I could test our uniformity by suggesting a major remodeling of the sanctuary, or worse, the Holy of holies-the church kitchen. But I value my life too much."

Agreeing is hard.

The Great Schism that split the church in the first place came about due to a complex mix of religious disagreements and political conflicts. But one of the many big disagreements between the western (Roman) and eastern (Byzantine) branches of the church had to do with... the kind of bread that should be used for the sacrament of communion. Should it be yeast risen? Or flatbread?

We can argue over anything it seems. Bread. Carpet. Liturgy.

But then what?

Well then the boundaries begin to be built.

Boundaries. Borders. When the very deepest longing in the human soul is to have a sense of belonging.

The key it seems is to practice belonging without the need to agree.

Well we are very lucky I think, in that we have

at the centre, at the very heart of our religion, an excellent place to start: Our sacred stories. My greatest joy is that we get to share a life together, a body, if you will, in conversation with a body of literature. This body of literature known as scripture.

Poetry and Wisdom and wonky proverbs and stories. That's what we need. Like this odd one today from Paul about being the body. That reminds us of all the other stories:

Stories of feet, dusty and tired, that were cradled by Jesus' hands as he washed them and said to remember to love each other.

Stories of bellies rumbling on a hillside in need of a bit of bread and fish,

Stories of knees dropping to the ground when the news broke their heart ...or opened it,

Stories of hands tossing out fishing nets and pouring out oil,

And ears listening for danger or good news or the sound of a baby born,

Stories of tears falling from eyes, anointing a beloved who has died.

Stories have the power to face us with ourselves. Told well they have the power to upset our certainties. Which sounds awful, and sometimes it is. But it opens us to possibility, to imagination. To seeing things – and other people – in a new way. And we are up to this work.

Don't we all cope with our own lives, with our own friendship circles and family circles [I should tell you I first typed 'circuses' by mistake instead of 'circles' ...but perhaps not so much a mistake] which are all full of their own complexities and subtleties? Full of the unexpected and the all-too-expected. So surely we know, or we have had practice at, how to bring an eye, an ear, how to bring our whole body towards a text.

And scripture has respect for the readers – I love that - because it doesn't say, "Oh, here is how to read me. Here's how to understand me." Our stories are filled with the kind of imagination that says, look, it's possible to take a meaning from this, or it can mean many things all at once. And it might mean something that was never imagined by the writer. And I think any sacred art worth its salt is not telling you how it should be interpreted, but it is there as a small act of survival and remembrance, in the hope that it might create an echo, like music from a far country, for someone else to help them pay attention to the circumstances of their life too.

We don't have to agree what the stories mean any more than we need to agree on what colour that carpet is, we have only to know that they will stand up to us all; they will bear the weight of us all and all the mess we might drag in with us.

Amen.

HYMN: Let There Be Light VU #679

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R_2mCydR9g&ab_channel=GideonChung

Prayer of Dedication/Offering

Sometimes, we believe the gifts we offer do not matter. But when they are combined with all the other gifts – of healing, of hope, of compassion, of your heart – they can become rivers of grace and justice flowing through the lives of everyone around us. We give thanks for all the gifts you bring and we offer them in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYERS OF PEOPLE: In honour of WPCU, the prayers today are comprised from the deep hearts of friends and colleagues in the UCC.

BENEDICTION:**Announcements:**

*Official Board will meet to approve the Budget via Zoom on January 30 at 12:30 pm.