Finding Your Place in the Body of Christ
Rev. Amber Henry Neuroth
Preached on Sunday, September 15, 2013
Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria, VA
1 Corinthians 12

Last Sunday, I tried an experiment. I tried having us take photos on cell phones for our photo board. I thought it could be casual and fun and give us a great board. Now, I didn’t explain this, but I had thought we would group families together, so all members of a family would be in at least one photo together, so that photo could be labeled with all of their names and people could learn to associate parents with children, etc. But in Hope fashion, we just had a photo free-for-all. And in Hope fashion we ended up with very few members of the same family in the same picture together, but we had adults hugging other children, friends in a group together. And I thought, wow, that really is Hope. People being silly; people hugging and loving someone else’s kids; and people genuinely enjoying the community. The photos were mostly blurry, but hey it’s us.

One of the reasons we wanted to do that is so that we can see one another, we can understand the depth and breadth of the community and we can be together as the body of Christ even when we are not all physically here in the same building. And eventually we will get there with the photo board.

Another way we have tried to bring us together is the new FB group. We have a closed FB group, meaning private to members of the community. It won’t show up to anyone else that you know. In there, you can share prayer requests or if you need help with a task or won’t be at church, you can let people know. It’s way to stay closer together.

Why is important to be connected, closer together, to get to know new faces? Why is important to be a body?

From the earliest moments in Jesus’ ministry and in the very first churches, the message was very clear. You cannot be a Christian by yourself. If you are really going to live out this faith, you need to do it in some kind of community. The community loves and challenges us on our faith journey. It is essential to God that we find some way to live together and find some way to love one another.

And that was as tough in the early church as it is now. Paul did a lot to nurture the early churches, helping them to include former slaves, Jews and Gentiles, even increased roles for women. He wrote letters and gave advice, prayers and analogies.

One of those famous analogies is the body of Christ that we heard read today.

He uses the image of the body of Christ in contrast to the prevailing Roman image of the day - the body politic. The body politic was also an image of the community as
the whole body and individuals as body parts, but it was used as kind of a justification of classism, saying that the feet are meant to be dirty, etc. The Romans wanted unity, but not equality. So all were meant to suffer their place silently for the greater good, even to feel proud that they contributed to the whole.

And in the church at Corinth, members were starting to separate themselves and think some might be better than others. Certain spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues were lifted up and those people were special members of the community. They were becoming the body politic with certain gifts at the top and certain newcomers at the bottom.

Church was starting to mimic Roman society. And so Paul writes to them a strong message. No, no, no no no.

He uses the image of the body to preach the opposite message of the body politic. This is the body of Christ. And as such every member of the community has equal value and has something to contribute to the whole.

Paul turns the whole thing on his head. He goes completely countercultural. This is an incredible message of inclusion and love for all and it is a challenge.

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 the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 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, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissenion within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

In this message, Paul’s vision of the Body of Christ, I hear Open and Affirming. I hear faith for people of all abilities. I hear welcoming to children and all kinds of families. I hear a safe place for people to grow older. I hear no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey you are welcome here.
And when we stand in an egalitarian community in which all are really welcome, we are being as countercultural today as Paul was then. We are standing up for radical love. We are making a radical statement of love and inclusion.

And we want that here at Hope UCC. We say we want that here. But saying we want that is only part of the journey to the body of Christ. Saying we want to be a radically inclusive place doesn’t make us one. We have been trying to do put into place policies, make welcoming worship, use inclusive language, all the things the experts say a church should do.

But we haven’t always taken the time to the last part of what Paul talks about, our spiritual gifts.

But how can we have the body if we don’t ever think about what part we are, if we really don’t know what our own spiritual gifts are. That is part of being a community of radical love. So this season is focused on spiritual gifts.

We often don’t even know what that means. Are we talking about what I am good at? What my hobbies are? Not really? Are we talking about what committee or team, you pastor Amber want me to be on, not really.

Instead of, “what are my spiritual gifts,” the question really becomes “what is the holy spirit speaking into my life?” And how am I lifting that up and using it to better a larger community?

There’s a Quaker saying, “let your life speak.” And that’s really what spiritual gifts are, the way we use our lives to speak, to express the divine image in all of us. The way we are participating in the body of Christ at any given moment. And those ways can change. The biggest part of spiritual gifts is the source of them, God, and being open to God calling to you.

Now, some of you may be wondering, “Is she going to use that word, discernment again? It’s almost as if discernment is a dirty word around here and it shouldn’t be. Constant discernment is part of a spiritual journey, part of our walk with Jesus. Because the alternative is saying that we already have everything figured out or that we don’t care. If we care, then we need to be constantly inviting God into the conversation, listening to the breath as it whispers again. Listening and discerning does not mean doing nothing. On the contrary, we hope that understanding ourselves better will spring us into action and greater fulfillment in our life together.

So everyone take out your brochures and look at the calendar for a minute. Over these weeks we are thinking about different spiritual gifts. We have picked a few, there are lots more. We will be learning Bible stories with characters who had these gifts and we are inviting ourselves to be in discernment about the ways that God might be speaking or not speaking in our own community. We have one Sunday with worship stations that will be more focused listening time. And we have a
Spiritual Gifts Retreat. In advance of the retreat, we will offer a spiritual gifts inventory, a questionnaire that we will use at the retreat to help us discern the whispers of God.

When we think about the body of Christ and spiritual gifts,...

The question isn't who is going to do this or that, the question is what is God doing? How do you find energy in community, where is your heart? And how will we act on it, because when we do, we can't help but challenge inequality and injustice as Paul did with his message.

So this Fall, we invite you to join us, finding our place in the body of Christ.

Amen.