

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, January 24, 2015
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Many Members, One Body

One of the first people that I met when I moved to Minnesota was a woman named Mary Jost. She was bicycling on the street in front of the home that I had just purchased and moved into only a day or two prior to her visit. She decided to be neighborly and stop and introduce herself. She quickly became a significant friend. I was drawn to her informality, her hospitality, her openness and her gentle laugh. Eventually our children became friends. She was a person who was easy to be with.

Mary, whose maiden name was Brand, gifted me with the opportunity to come to know her father, Dr. Paul Brand. Dr. Paul Brand had been a missionary from England to India. He was a medical doctor. During his missionary time he was drawn to working with people dealing with leprosy.

According to Wikipedia: *“Dr. Paul Brand was the first physician to appreciate that leprosy did not cause the rotting away of tissues, but that it was the loss of the sensation of pain which made sufferers susceptible to injury.”* People affected by leprosy lost their fingers or toes because they had no sensation of pain in their extremities. Dr. Brand became one of the world’s foremost physicians in the field of treatment of leprosy and was the Medical Director of the only leprosy sanitarium in the United States.

Brand also wrote several books. I enjoyed all of his writings, but the one that relates to today’s text from I Corinthians, is one that he co-authored with Phillip Yancey titled Fearfully and Wonderfully Made. The title of the book is based on a verse from Psalms: *“I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.”* (Psalm 139:14). In this book Yancey and Brand explored every system of the human physical body from both a scientific perspective and from a faith perspective. Amazon describes it as: *“a spellbinding world of cells, systems, and chemistry that bears the impress of a still deeper, unseen reality.”* I remember that I came away from reading that book with a deeper spirituality and a deeper appreciation for God’s amazing creative capacities even as it offered scientific descriptions of all the systems of the bodies and how the systems interact to form what we know as “one body”.

In writing commentary for today’s text from I Corinthians, Biblical Commentator Raewynne J. Whiteley writes from a similar perspective combining the scientific and the mystical appreciation of the human body. She writes: *“The human body has 206 bones, 639 muscles, and about 6 pounds of skin, along with ligaments, cartilage, veins, arteries, blood, fat, and more. Every time we hear a sound; every time we take a step; every time we take a breath, hundreds of different parts work together so that what we experience is a single movement, our minds and bodies working as one unit. Even the greatest engineers struggle to achieve anything like it in mechanical form. The human body represents one of the most complex*

*systems in existence.*¹

I affirm that all that I know scientifically about the body, all that I know about physics and quantum physics, all that I know about the science of evolution – none of these negates the mystical and spiritual reality that gives expression in my living out of my Christian faith and in my Biblical understanding. Albert Einstein is quoted as having said, *“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”*² I choose to live my life as though everything is a miracle – especially the miracle of God as I understand God, the miracle that is our lives, our minds, our bodies, our existence.

Now we turn to the image in our text of the church as the body of Christ. I believe that for the church to operate as one body is another of God’s miracle. Paul says, *“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”* (I Corinthians 12: 27) The Apostle Paul was writing in today’s text to a specific spiritual community in Corinth. Paul had founded the church at Corinth and was very fond of this body of Christ and each of its members. He wrote this letter to a community that was finding itself divided. Some individual members of the church in Corinth had come to believe that they were more important than other members.

Biblical commentator, Lee C. Barrett, helps us to understand how the image of the body was used by Paul to address these issues. Barrett says, *“Rather than arguing for hierarchy and subordination, Paul uses the figure of the body to advance a rationale for diversity and interdependence with a strongly egalitarian thrust. According to Paul’s analogy, the assertion of superiority is ridiculous, for it implicitly reduces the church to one body part and its function. By the end of this passage it becomes clear that the church as the body of Christ is not just a rhetorical device but points to real participation in Christ. The members of the church are enlivened by the same Spirit bestowed by Christ to do Christ’s work in the world..”*³

And what might the Apostle Paul write about the United Church of Christ in the Morningside neighborhood in Edina, Minnesota? Or what might we write? What are the things that unite us? I believe that I have witnessed that we are united by a desire to be in community and fellowship with one another, a desire to reach out to our community in multiple ways including the importance we place in our ministry known as Edina Morningside Preschool; a desire to be of service to those in our community and beyond who are in need, and by a desire to have a facility that supports all of these ministries. Individual members take responsibility in individual ways, but, I believe, we are mystically connected to one another by a sense of unity for these various ministries. We are, in many ways, many members, one body. It is God’s spirit that makes the human body one body with many parts. It is God’s spirit that makes the church many members, one body.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

² <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/987-there-are-only-two-ways-to-live-your-life-one>

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.

I have not witnessed that we are divided, as was the church of Corinth by those that think they are superior to others within this community. I have witnessed that we support one another in our spiritual gifts, whether they be gifts of music, or gifts of teaching, or gifts of finance, or gifts of administration, or gifts of healing, or gifts of leadership, or whatever our gifts might be.

What are the things that work to divide us here at Edina Morningside Church? I suggest that in some ways we may be divided by a diversity of theological perspectives. We may be divided by the degree to which we wish to live out our covenant with the United Church of Christ – in part because of a perceived difference theologically. We may be divided by our understandings of social justice and how we choose to live out God’s call to racial and economic equality. I believe that the divisions we experience are primarily related to the means for living out our mission not our mission itself. The process that we are engaged in around coming to agreement around specific goals for living into our mission is an example of this agreement on mission and differences in how specifically to live it out. I believe that God rejoices in our discernment of these goals.

Our gospel text in Luke begins with acknowledging that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit. Jesus then quotes Isaiah with these words.” *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”* (Luke 4: 18 – 19)

Commentators agree today’s text is a clear statement of the mission that Jesus brought into his ministry and that Jesus brings to our ministry today. Jesus uses the words of Isaiah to express this mission. This says, to me, that God’s purpose for God’s people has never changed. It always has been and always will be: *“to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

In what ways are we filled with the spirit? And how are we connected to the same purpose that Jesus stated by quoting these words of Isaiah? In the vision statement for our church, we say: “...we joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ’s example.” Therefore we are called to imagine ourselves enlivened by the same spirit that enlivened Jesus. Commentator, Robert M. Brearley, says, *“How can we know that we have the power of the Spirit? We know because the Holy Spirit gives us something to do for God, and a time to do it. There is a sense of urgency in Jesus' mission...The time of God's Holy Spirit is today, right now. It is the Holy Spirit speaking when you hear God whisper to you: "Child of God, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day.”* May all of us live this day, empowered by the Holy Spirit and seeking to joyously rise to the challenge of living Jesus Christ’s example. My it be so. Amen.