

Our UCC Faith: Called to Community
Part II of a Summer Sermon Series on the UCC Statement of Faith
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M Gingras
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1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Romans 12:1-8, Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

If the churches in Rome, and Corinth and Ephesus had one thing in common, it was their need for a good lesson about unity. Not much has changed, of course! Unity seems to be one of the most ephemeral traits of the Body of Christ in these days too!

Our divisions became one of the first things the early church fought over. The apostle Paul goes to great length to suggest that the two major factions of his day – Jews and Gentiles – were both worthy of baptism, a seat at the communion table, in short, God’s love and forgiveness and acceptance. But the folks in those churches didn’t seem to agree because Paul had to write to them about it again and again!

Paul needed a positive way to express the kind of unity that he hoped to see in Christ's church, one that people from a variety of backgrounds could understand. So he used a metaphor we can all relate to, because we all have one... the body. This is both simple, and brilliant. But I still wonder what made Paul think of it?

Maybe it was his awareness of how fragile his body was in a first-century context. Imagine him waking up one day, feeling grateful that he had made it this far. Paul was likely in his mid-40’s or 50’s when he travelled and wrote his letters, which we may consider to be middle age but in his day was rather ancient!

Paul might have known he was lucky to live that long, given that about 25 percent of infants died before age one, and about half of all children before age ten. Maybe his long life had something to do with not living in a city all that time! Cities back then were a breeding ground for disease.

Paul may also have been fortunate enough to forgo the services of the physicians in his day, whose cures and home remedies often did more harm than good. His health was robust enough to be active and travel. And in later years, when his vision began to suffer, Paul still believed what he had known all along: that the human body is a precious and fragile thing.

Of course, we all should be grateful for our bodies, even the ones that bear aches and pains. And it's probably true that most of us should take better care of the ones we have been given. Our bodies are a network of miraculous interdependent systems, each part working together to survive and thrive in an often hostile environment.

Maybe Paul thought up his body metaphor from visits he had paid to various cities with shrines honoring the Greek god of healing, Asclepius. In Paul's day, if you had an infirmity, you presented Asclepius with an offering of honey cakes, and then slept overnight in his temple. The god would appear to you in a dream and heal the affected body part. With thanksgiving, you would have a terra cotta model of that body part made to display at the shrine next to the bathing pool.

Perhaps one day Paul sat by that pool, contemplating the gathered replicas of those hands, feet, arms, legs, eyes and ears. Maybe he asked himself: *"What life do any of these cold, clay body parts have unless they are all joined together in a living body?"*

Whatever made him think of it, the body is a perfect metaphor for church unity! It's a much better one than family or team. After all, you can choose to sit out a season and take a break from being a member of a softball team. Or I've heard of some that go on vacation to the Bahamas without taking all the members of their family!

But you can't take a break from dealing with the various parts of your body.

When Paul says, *"You are the body of Christ,"* he doesn't mean that the church literally is Christ's body, so as to be without error or flaw. After all, we are all imperfect people. But when we gather as church, we are able to give Christ a face to show to the world, our words of love and challenge become his voice, our work of compassion flows from his hands, we go into new places to serve transported by his feet – all of it, bolstered by the power of community.

We are all members of one body, and God cares for each of us and desires us to care for one another. God yearns for us to be grateful for one another's gifts, to feel each other's pain and participate in one another's healing. Our United Church of Christ's statement of faith invites us to be an interdependent part of the body when it says:

You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be your servants in the service of others, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory. (The UCC Statement of Faith)

Our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ are a journey from independence to interdependence, living not as self-contained individuals, but as members together of Christ's body. We grow into that identity as we experience moments that call us to grow in empathy and compassion. When another part of the body suffers, we feel it too as we offer our encouragement and support. And when all parts of a group relate to one another in this way, the result is robust health!

Today, as in Paul's day, the Church is the body of Jesus in the world. Although the phases of our individual lives may change, we will always be a part of the body because belonging to the church is a lifelong commitment. Our participation in the sacraments reminds us of God's grace and identifies us as God's people. In the United Church of Christ, our faith is made real through making choices and following through with loving actions. But we can't do it on our own.

Have you ever tried to move one of the racks of folding chairs we have in Wilton Hall all by yourself? I have, and I don't recommend it! Imagine instead that you are working together with someone. Isn't that better?

Whether it is painting a living room or moving a chair rack with a partner, it helps to work out a strategy, something like, *"I think this will work if you're on one side and I'm on the other"*. The next step is to share that vision with each other so that you can be of "one mind" on the nature of the task in front of you.

Even so, vision alone does not move the chair rack. It takes action: walking, pushing, pulling, steadying – that is required, too, as are mid-course communications and corrections. The whole thing can be seen as an effort in which people learn to share, if only for a few moments, the same mind.

Such shared imagination-in-action does not ignore the difficulties of what it is really like to live with others. Chairs still fall off of racks sometimes. Tempers flare and blame is placed, usually on those who are deemed the weakest or who the herd has decided to pick off. Paul knows the difficulties of living in community, and yet he refuses to try to solve it by ranking some

members as more important than others, or by imagining that "gifted" means the same thing for everyone. This is because, by design, the body includes members with different gifts.

In the United Church of Christ, this can be seen among the various churches that we are in fellowship with. The Monroe Congregational Church may have the strongest Strawberry Festival in the Connecticut conference, but the United Congregational Church in Bridgeport has a yearlong feeding program that serves thousands of urban poor. Brookfield Congregational Church may have the best resources to resettle refugees in this area, but St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Chicago runs a vacation bible school that serves only refugee and low-income children.

And yet, the one who designed the body of which we are a now a part did not make any of our church communities the "best" or the "smartest one in the room" and we shouldn't think of ourselves that way either. Whatever gifts we may have, we will use to our own abilities in service to our neighbors, enacting God's love. That's what we should celebrate that we all hold in common.

As those in Christ imagine and enact what it is to be generous and compassionate, we bear witness that our head is in a different game. By such imagining and acting, our individual bodies declare what is true about us as a group: that we belong to Christ, and we belong together. Thanks be to God for the body and ALL of its parts! Amen.