

Westminster Sermon – “Doing Our Part”

Sunday, January 27, 2019

Scripture Readings – Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6, I Corinthians 12:12-31

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6. The book of Nehemiah narrates Nehemiah's return after the Babylonian exile to rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Following the completion of the restorative work, all the people (men, women, and children) gather to hear the word of God read and interpreted. It is a solemn and holy time in the life of this faith community and the people express their gratitude and reverence with their whole body: feet, hands, heads, and tongues. Let us open our hearts and minds to the hearing of God's word.

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is I Corinthians 12:12-31. Paul introduces the metaphor of the physical body to describe the unity within the church. This image was not original. Philosophers in Paul's day thought of the cosmos as a body, composed of diverse but complementary elements. In some classical literature, the metaphor of the body was used to keep people obedient and in their place. Paul gives this image a new twist, however, speaking of the “body of Christ” which honors all the parts with mutual respect and which recognizes we are each only part of the whole. Hear now God's Holy Word.

¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ 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.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ 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; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Doing Our Part"

The text: "*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*" 1 Corinthians 12:27

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the privilege of belonging to the body of Christ and for all who do their part at Westminster. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

What a joy it is to gather as the Westminster family, to support our youth in mission by partaking in a delicious English Breakfast, to honor a philanthropic member for her gift to our endowment, and to recognize the work of so many faithful members "doing their part" in the 2018 Annual Report at our meeting following worship.

Paul's metaphor of the church as the "body of Christ" is one of the most memorable of his teachings. Underneath the amusing imagery of talking feet and self-deprecating ears is the profound statement of unity that is the essence of the church: "*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*" The metaphor of individual members together comprising one complete body provides an opportunity for reflection on how churches function as people come for worship, education, fellowship, and mission. It particularly raises the question of how one fosters communities where there is a healthy balance between the need for connection and for a clear sense of oneself as an individual. To paraphrase Paul, how can the ear maintain and value its essential "earnestness," even as it participates in the functioning of the whole body? (*Feasting on the Word*, Rev. Karen Stokes)

In his book, Generation to Generation; Family Process in Church and Synagogue, family therapist and Rabbi Edwin Friedman suggests the family systems model is a useful tool for understanding and encouraging a healthy unity within the church. The Family Systems model, which I studied during my doctorate coursework in pastoral counseling, speaks to the importance of "differentiation" within a family or congregation. Rabbi Friedman defines differentiation as "the capacity to be an 'I' while remaining connected to the 'we.'"

The term self-differentiation was first introduced in the 1950's by American Psychiatrist Murray Bowen as a part of his family systems theory. Interpersonal differentiation is when we can distinguish ourselves and our experience from the experience of the people with whom we are connected.

To be self-differentiated is to have the capacity to separate oneself from the surrounding emotional environment and to maintain a clarity about one's principles and vision even in the midst of differing views. A self-differentiated person is willing to be vulnerable within the family or congregation, can feel compassion for another's suffering without becoming responsible for it, and can rejoice when another receives honor without feeling negated by their recognition or success. We all seek to be self-differentiated and it is our hope and prayer at Westminster that we are doing our part to promote self-differentiation within this body of Christ.

People come to church in search of meaning for their lives, spiritual growth, a deeper relationship with Christ, and opportunities to be of service in the world. People want to become a part of something larger than their individual lives and to do their part to make a difference in our world. People also come to church in search of authentic community, a place where they are known and accepted, and where they can experience a sense of belonging.

There will always be differences within a congregation: differing opinions, politics, experiences, priorities, and needs. A healthy body of Christ does not try to play down those differences in the interest of some superficial harmony. When this natural diversity within a congregation is not allowed to be expressed openly, subtle judgments are communicated, and there is a pressure to conform. However, in a church where individuality and closeness are well balanced, and self-differentiation is honored, the eyes, ears, hands, and feet can do their part and maintain their own identities, vision, and loyalty in the unity of Christ.

A healthy church invites and enables its members to ask the question, “How can I be who I am and how can I do my part while staying connect within this body?” Paul writes that, when the body of Christ is functioning in accordance with God’s design, *if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.* (vs. 26) The integrity and value of the individual members are honored within Christ’s body, yet in the context of compassion, respect, and mutuality.

As the body of Christ at Westminster, we gather today to hear and to understand God’s word. As the ancient Hebrews gathered at the Water Gate, to honor their past, to celebrate their present, and to look to their future, let us open our eyes, ears, hearts, and minds to God’s spirit in this time and place. By the grace of God, may we, as individual members within this body of Christ, each do our part. Amen.