

January 27, 2013 "Each One Part of the Body" Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 1 Cor. 12:12-31

Note: the actual preaching of this sermon turned out to be quite different from this text. - FTE

If there's one thing I've noticed about you, the people of Winsted UMC, it is your warmth and willingness to reach out to other people who are in need. When the food pantry is low on stock, you bring in more. When Storm Sandy hit those near the coast so terribly, you responded with a generous offering. When kids appeared in our midst, one of our members stepped up to the plate to offer them Sunday School, without being asked. Some of you cook, some of you write checks, some of you sing or play an instrument, some of you greet, some of you read scriptures or usher or help with the thrift shop or serve as counters. Some attend Bible study, some work on the building. Some of you are part of the prayer ministry of this church. And some folks, who live far away or cannot easily get out and are rarely here in the building, send offerings of money that help to pay for our heat! Everybody has a part here, whether you have thought about it much or not. Everybody matters here. And part of our call to be the Body of Christ in this place is to make sure that everybody knows that he/she matters, to us and to God!

The Rev. Dr. James Forbes, who retired several years ago from preaching at the Riverside Church in NYC, once told how there were eight children in his family as he was growing up, and how his mother, at dinnertime, would call everybody to the table and then, before they would eat, would ask, "Is anybody missing?" If any family member was not there, before anybody could eat a bite, a plate of food had to be made up for the one who was missing, and set in the oven to be kept warm. That was part of the ritual of Jim Forbes' family. Only after food had been set aside for those who weren't there could the others dig in.

Rev. Forbes then went on to suggest that perhaps God is asking, as we partake of the blessings of our own lives, "Is anybody missing? Is anybody hungry? Have you set a plate aside for the others in this family who may need to eat?" (from a sermon Dr. Forbes preached to the NYAC clergy)

That's what it means to belong. To be part of a group means to be included, to be missed when you're not present, to be counted, to be considered. When you belong to a church, you are counted: on the membership rolls, in the committee meetings; your money is counted and counted on; your vote is counted..... And hopefully, when you are ill or laid up, you can count on someone else in your church to call you up and see what you need, to visit you, to care about you, to pray for you.

Our response as members of God's church involves a variety of gifts, abilities given to us by God so that we can be effective in sharing with the world the love of Jesus Christ. That's our purpose as God's people, part of the Body of Christ.

The scriptures for today offered insight on our identity and call as God's people. The selection we heard read from Nehemiah occurred right after the walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, following the terrible devastation by the conquering Babylonians. The Jewish people had come home from decades in exile in Babylon, and were struggling to rebuild their city and their identity as God's people. Those who had been away in exile were reunited with those who had

been left in Palestine. The body was once again complete geographically, but they were not yet unified emotionally or spiritually. They had to reestablish their relationship with one another. The prophet tells us how this was facilitated through the reading of the scroll that had been found in a wall, a scroll that contained God's law, the Torah.

As they heard the word of God read, the people were moved to tears. For hours they listened and their hearts heard. As the truth of the message reached them, they cried. Nehemiah wrote, "Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'" (vs 9-10)

Ezra helped them see what God's Word told them that it meant to be God's people: He called them to celebrate instead of mourn, and to share the food of their celebration with those who had no provisions, since "the joy of the Lord is your strength." Celebrate and share, because God's joy is your strength!

Our other lesson for today was taken from Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth. From what we know, the Corinthian church was having big trouble. The people were grumbling and bickering with one another, and competing over the spiritual gifts God had given them. They were apparently claiming, "My gift is better than yours, so *I* should be given preferential treatment..." "I'm more spiritually mature than you, so *I* can call the shots at the church council..." This kind of thing prompted Paul to plead with them to see themselves as all part of one body, the Body of Christ.

We also are part of that same Body.... We are parts with one purpose, that of offering the love of Jesus Christ to the world as God's Holy Spirit empowers us to recognize our gifts and nudges/guides us to use them.

Retired Bishop William Willimon told how, when he was a pastor, some of his most blessed times were times when he witnessed folks putting their abilities to use in new ways. In Willimon's words: "I recall, for instance, a businessman whom I had in one congregation. He was brusque to the point of bluntness and no one had ever thought of him for any job in the church – he was a hardboiled business guy who was too rough and direct for nice church people. Well, this man retired and found retirement difficult. So one day, when he was telling me that he was struggling with depression because of his... situation, I suggested to him that he come work in our church clothes closet and food pantry. I don't know why on earth I thought that it might be a good idea. Maybe the Holy Spirit put the idea into my head!

"The man went to work there three mornings a week. There he met people who were down on their luck, people struggling, like the mother who had had her electricity turned off because she was late paying her electric bill. Well, this man heard about that and next thing you know he was on the telephone talking with the president of the electric company (a golf buddy of his)

telling him that he ought to be ashamed of his company turning off the power to this woman's house. She got her electricity back that very day." (*Pulpit Resource*, vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 18-19)

Willimon also told about a woman who had an abrasive personality who ended up being a perfect fit to help push things through city hall for a committee working to help the poor.... And another woman who was asked to leave the church choir because of her challenging voice and then tried to run the Sunday school with dismal results because of organizational skills but who finally found the right "fit." She had a real gift when it came to yard work, and brought about a Saturday tradition, "Saturdays with Edna," where Edna would enlist others from the congregation to help beautify the church grounds." (Gleaned from *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 18-19, extensively edited by FTE)

All sorts of gifts, all sorts of people, all part of the same body, each with the purpose of serving God. Some have the gift of prayer. Some teach Sunday School. Some sing in the choir or carry out a welcoming ministry. Some light the candles, or count the money, or oversee the church property. Some watch over the budget. Some gather to study the Bible. Some visit shut-ins and listen to another's pain. Some take meals, or provide a ride, or bring a food offering... All are parts with a purpose. Each is part of the Body of Christ.

We belong to God. We belong to the family of persons who were given life by God, which means that finally there is *no person* who is outside the family. Most of us have enough to eat, and friends, and plenty to do... But let us always remember in our hearts our true family, our most profound calling: To make sure that we belong to God in such a way as to let others see that *they also* belong and have a place at God's table!

Most of the time we don't really see the results of our efforts, but God does.

Here's a story: A Lutheran pastor in Minnesota was speaking at his retirement dinner. He had served one church for his entire career, 40 years in the same parish. He told of an event early in his ministry that he had never talked about before.

"The church had recently built the memorial garden, a place created for people to come and be at peace, to remember loved ones whose ashes were interred there. There were small trees and flowering plants, a few benches and a plaque with names of those in whose memory the garden was given. It was our prayer garden.

"Soon after it was dedicated, though, local teenagers started gathering there in the evenings. I could hear their music playing and their laughter. In the mornings I would often find a soda bottle or candy wrapper on the ground. This bothered me. It bothered me that they were coming to the church's garden, it bothered me that they were not respectful of what the place was created to be, it bothered me most that I was afraid to go over and tell them to leave—because if I did I was afraid that they might vandalize the place.

"So in the evenings when the teens would gather I would walk by to let them know that they were being watched, and in the morning as they walked to school I would inspect the garden for

litter. For years, I fumed every summer's day about the misuse of the garden, and about my inability to deal effectively with the situation.

"I'll never forget the July evening when two of those kids were killed in a traffic accident. The funeral was at the church and the boys' families had the ashes placed in the prayer garden. The deaths cast a deep sadness over the entire town. The group of teens stayed away from the garden for several weeks. Then one night I heard it, the music, the voices of teenagers. I was furious; how could they be there, hanging out in such a sacred place? I went over there determined to throw them out.

"As I walked into the garden everyone became silent. But before I could begin my tirade, one of the teens said, 'Rev. Erickson, can we ask you something? We've been so sad about Jeff and Ed's death that we haven't been able to come back here until tonight. I'm glad their families put their ashes here. They always loved this place; Jeff said it was the only place in town that didn't throw teenagers out. We had some great times here, but what has happened has made us see that there is a lot more to life than we understand.' And then she asked me something that blew me away, she said, 'Will you teach us how to pray?' I was speechless for a moment, then I sat down with them, and we prayed, and cried, and shared memories. I never told them why I had come over that night. And you know, most of those teenagers are here today, now the backbone of this church—hard working members who sing in the choir, pay the bills, keep the garden up and complain about their teenager children." (Story from Woody Eddins)

We are the Body of Christ in this imperfect world. The work of the Church is to share the Word, the Word made flesh in Jesus, the Word of hope and forgiveness, the Word of grace and healing, the Word as we are empowered to share it with others through the guidance and power of God's Holy Spirit.

May God find in us persons who are willing to be led to use the gifts and time we have been given so as to make a difference, even when we don't realize it, in the lives of others. By the grace, wisdom, and power of God, this can happen, since each of us is an essential part of the Body of Christ. Thank God. Amen.