

January 24, 2010

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

"We're all in this together!"

Posters on bulletin boards and doors of offices and classrooms seem to kind of be "my thing." Here at the church I have a big one with the picture of the one and only Hamish, the Scottish Highland bull. (I actually saw and patted the big guy a couple of years ago!) There are others on my bulletin board, ones bearing brief philosophic messages or scriptural references. One poster remembered this past week adorned the door of my Connecticut classroom years ago. Pictured was an orangutan submerged in a pool or lake, head and shoulders visible above the water. The creature had a rather startled look, its hair was frizzy and wet trickles were running down the face. The caption was *"We're all in this together."*

It seemed a natural message for third-graders who gathered daily, like it or not, with one another and their teacher. One day I pointed to the poster and remarked: "That is I, your teacher!" There were a couple of giggles but most of the children either ignored or remained non-committal. And so all of us moved on to whatever was next on our collective agenda.

Later, when the children were busy with some assignment and I was working at my desk, little Karen Moschitta came to me. It's important for you to know that Karen rarely spoke above a whisper thus I always needed to listen carefully. As I gave my full attention to the child, she pointed to the poster and commented ever so softly: "I don't think that really looks like you." Then she paused and added: "except maybe for the hair." (At the time I had a perm so there were actually curls or, from Karen's observation and comment, perhaps just frizz!)

Frankly, it's pretty easy to point to a poster and joke with third graders about being a unit than it is to consider that all Christians are bound together as members of the body of Christ. If we are indeed not only important but necessary to one another, this means that conservative and liberal, Protestants and Catholics, militant and pacifist, wealthy and poor, right-to-lifers and those who are pro-choice, Democrat, Republican and Independent, persons of high profile and those who are unseen are to welcome and embrace each other. Now I don't know about you but when I'm totally honest with myself, I find that this notion is mildly upsetting. It's more comforting for me to be with like-minded people who are decent, orderly, educated and think that I'm ok.

The Rev. Debbie Blue, a pastor at House of Mercy in St. Paul, notes that the Apostle Paul is quick to point out that every person and every part is important to the whole body. She continues this way: "I think of my own congregation and of how we need all the parts—extroverts, introverts, cooks and musicians. There's a lot about the church I like.

"The scandal of the thing becomes apparent to me, however, when I think of the parts of the church out there that I find truly unacceptable...When I read about evangelical sergeants in the United States military who 'distribute Christian apocalyptic videos to the troops in Iraq' and 'impose mandatory briefings on the correlation of the war to the book of Revelation,' I'd

like to say, 'Cut off that hand.' I belong to Apollos, I belong to Barth, I belong to a liberal intelligent peace-loving church; I do not belong to this.

"But Paul says God chose what is foolish in the world, what is weak. God chose what is low and despised. Paul says God chose all of us: sick and beautiful and broken people, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, desert mystics, evangelical sergeants, church ladies, bishops, and even me. He seems to think it is important that we love each other, that we somehow allow love to trump division." (*The Christian Century*, January 12, 2010, p. 19)

What a revolutionary Christian thought: "allow love to trump division!"

You may or may not know that Matt Weerts teaches our Junior/Senior High class on Sunday mornings. What the youth appear to most appreciate about Matt, as do I, is his creative spirit. On Wednesday evening I learned from Libby what had transpired last week when they gathered. After reading the passage found in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the where Jesus challenges his listeners to love those whom one would like to send riding off into the sunset never to be heard from again, Matt challenged the young people as well as himself. What he had everyone do, as I remember, was to write or draw something that would be secretly given to a personal rival or, more to the point, one's enemy. Because Libby shared with me, I know that she followed through. Matt did the same. About the others, I do not know since I have not talked with them.

What a positive idea for all of us to consider! Believe me, in the midst of personal stewing the other day, the Spirit was nudging me big time as I thought about the possibility of doing the same. Something unpleasant was churning inside of my being and I was not at all ready to let go of it and to move on. How much better it would be if I and all of you would take seriously Jesus' challenge and worked really hard at ridding our minds, souls and bodies of all that gets in the way of our functioning as the body of Christ here in our church and in the entire world. What if we allowed love to trump division??

After Christmas I saw the movie "Invictus." As you probably are aware, it is the story of Nelson Mandela's efforts to unite his countrymen and to bring peace to his native land by bringing the Rugby World Cup to South Africa. The games were, of course, exciting but it is Mandela's negotiations toward reconciliation that was absolutely amazing. Blacks and whites alike were mistrustful of each other thus initially resisted all that the newly elected leader was trying to do. They simply could not figure him out and the "they" included his daughter. Mandela invited the captain of the South African team, Francois Pienaar, to his office for a discussion which was both surprising and confusing to Pienaar. However, a small seed was planted, Mandela was insistent and slowly, ever so attitudes began to change. Like it or not, all South Africans were made to realize that they were, indeed, all in the process together.

What was particularly moving for Pienaar was a tour of Robben Island and the cell in which Mandela had spent most of his twenty-seven years in prison. Afterwards it seemed almost impossible that the former prisoner could possibly have any compassion for those who

incarcerated and then held him captive. Not only was there compassion, there was understanding and forgiveness. Pienaar learned from his President that the latter spent years writing and reading and studying his captors. A particular source of inspiration was the poem “Invictus” by the British poet William Ernest Henley. After seeing the film, I looked for and found Henley’s work and share it with you now:

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade.
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

Yesterday as we celebrated the promise of the Resurrection and the earthly life of Toi Kangus, I shared with those gathered how I had experienced first hand how members of the family shared their individual talents and God’s grace with one another. The journey they all traveled was certainly not easy nor was it always pleasant. Yet all, including Toi, were united as the Spirit moved among and around them.

The Apostle Paul reminds us as he did the Corinthian Christians of how each person is important to all the others. We simply cannot exist in a vacuum nor should we try. And we, much as we might like to do so, cannot exclude those who are different from or make us uncomfortable. After all, there may be and probably are those who would like to get rid of us!!

Matt Weerts challenged himself and others to make amends with at least one other person with whom there was disagreement or bitterness. Now that may seem insignificant at face value but I believe it is one humungous step toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Nelson Mandela put was able to put his painful past behind him in order to heal. In doing so, he was able to guide the people of his country along the path that led to understanding and peace.

I don't know whatever happened to the poster of the submerged orangutan but periodically I think about it as I did this past week. My little joke with a group of third graders pales in comparison to the aforementioned acts. It's just that the caption is ever so true in a classroom, a family, a church and a country if we are to be the best that we can be and live in harmony.

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it....If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." Amen.