

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday, 12 August 2018**

**“Members of One Another”
Christian Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-5:2**

One of the great things about preaching in a new country is that no one has heard my dumb jokes before. I like to tell a story is about deacon Mngadi and deacon Nyoni of the Thafamasi Congregational Church where I once ministered. They were always at odds with each other. They were constantly at each other's throat especially in deacons' meetings. When one of them said "Yebo" [Yes], you could be assured that the other would say "Cha" [No]. So, one day deacon Mngadi dies and arrives at the pearly gate. He notices how St. Peter asks everyone a question, before they proceeded. When it was his turn, St. Peter said: "Hi, Mngadi. To see if you qualify for heaven, I need to ask you to spell 'Jesus' for me". "That's easy", says Mngadi: "J-E-S-U-S". Peter said, "Great, you're in. But could you do me a small favor and take over here for a while? I just need to check-on something. I'll be back". Mngadi didn't mind and asked everyone in line to spell 'Jesus'. Just then, deacon Nyoni came through the line. "What are you doing here?" asked Nyoni. Mngadi said, "Oh, I am just filling-in for St. Peter asking everybody to spell a word before they can pass

through". "Oh yeah, what's the word?" asked Nyoni. After thinking for a moment, Mngadi says, "Since you are at St. Peter's gate, spell 'apocalyptic eschatology'!"

I like this little joke because it highlights upon a theme upon which we have recently been focusing: church unity. I hope you have been following the church's Facebook page. You may have noticed that Jenifer has been posting each week's message. As I looked at the posts, I realized that the Holy Spirit, through the lectionary calendar, inspired a sermon series, unbeknownst to me, over these past weeks. The sermon series is all about 'building a faith community'. We began on 1 July, when I first preached on 'Wounded Together, Healing Together'. Then on the 16th, we heard a message on inclusivity entitled 'Wherever You Are and Whoever You Are'. Last week, we heard that there is 'No Best Used by Date' on love, for it comes from God and is therefore an abundant and renewable resource. The Spirit is encouraging us at the beginning of our partnership together, to build this faith community - in unity.

The letter to the Ephesians is about church unity. Although many scholars doubt that Paul authored this letter, we can nonetheless imagine him writing to the church in Ephesus while in

prison - as he did so many other letters.¹ And Paul worries in his letter that the faith community there was losing, what one scholar called, “its vibrancy for the love of Christ”.² I can imagine Paul is worried, cooped-up in prison, hearing about this argument and that argument, this squabble and that squabble, worried that the entire missionary project might fall apart, not necessarily due to suppression and oppression of the faith by the state, but by internal divisions within the church. So, Paul asks to congregation to step-back, pause, gain perspective and remember what is primary, what is priority, what is essential.

I would like to focus this morning on one particular phrase the author uses in in our scripture: The author says those in Ephesus, and we at Centre Congregational, that they are “members of one another”. ‘Members of one another’. I chose to focus on this phrase because Paul uses it, or a slight variation of it in so many other letters. It is what we might say, a mantra of his. ‘Members of one another’. He uses this phrase so often that it actually becomes a Christian doctrine: “the doctrine of the church as Christ’s body”.³

¹ Victor Paul Furnish, “The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians”, *The Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1971), 834-5.

² Furnish, “The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians”, 842.

³ Furnish, “The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians”, 842.

I love this doctrine; it says that Jesus' human body has morphed, transformed after his resurrection and Pentecost, into the Church. In other words, the Church speaks the words that Jesus speaks. The Church acts as Jesus acts. The Church proclaims what Jesus proclaims. The Church heals that which Jesus heals. The Church feeds who Jesus feeds. The Church forgives who Jesus forgives. The Church affirms and accepts those who Jesus affirms and accepts. The Church suffers for those who Jesus suffers. And, this is a tough one, the Church dies for those whom Jesus died.

If all this is true, if we are the Church that is Jesus Christ, then we must be bold as Jesus was bold. We must be political, as Jesus was political [*not partisan*]. We must denounce practices that prioritize money rather than the kingdom of God. We must seek out and affirm those in our society that are the most marginalised. Jesus' ministry affirmed that female lives mattered. Jesus affirmed that physically disabled lives mattered. Jesus affirmed that poor people's lives matter. Jesus affirmed that even traitors and even enemies' lives matter. For Jesus, the lives of who society disadvantages count. Many theologians, including Pope Francis, have

termed Jesus' emphasis as Jesus' 'preference for the poor'.⁴ And the doctrine that the Church is the Body of Christ means for us not that we must proclaim that those lives that are marginalised matter.

Yesterday, I visited The Congregational Church of Middlebury to attend the election of our new Associate Conference minister. Middlebury's welcome brochure cites the familiar refrain, "Our church is not the building, our church is not the steeple ... our church is the people!" This is the doctrine that we, the church, are the Body of Christ is not just about us taking care of the world, the most marginalised and excluded in our society, but it is about taking care of *ourselves*. Our scripture states, "we are members of one another".

What does it mean to be members of one another? It means that we are not just members of a church, this church, Centre Church. It means, if the church is the people, that we are members of *one another*. In short, *we are each other* because we are unified in Christ. Now, all that is very theological, very philosophical. What does it mean practically?

⁴ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* published by the Roman curia in 2004 summarizes this principle. "This love or preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without health care and, above all, those without hope for a better future." Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii gaudium*, "Without the preferential option for the poor, the 'proclamation of the gospel risks being misunderstood or submerged'".

Almost two years ago to the day, I suffered a catastrophic shattering of my acetabulum (no, not my ass!), the spherical bone in which the head the femur rests. Seven pins and two titanium plates reconstructed the bone so that I still have a fully functional hip. Strangely, I never suffered any pain in my hip, neither during the accident nor after surgery. Soon after the surgery, I developed Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRaPS) that caused agonizing pain twenty-four hours a day and for which no pain medication provided relief. The reason, the intense torturous pain was in my right foot, where I suffered no injury. Because there was no injury to my foot, the pain was a seemingly incurable phantom pain for weeks. This period of my life proved one of the most difficult in my life to endure. I felt alone.

What I learned from this experience is that though my hip and foot performed much different functions, and though one experienced pain and the other not, and though one experienced injury and the other not, the foot was not made better by the healing of hip and the damage to the hip was not relieved by the foot that was never injured. And my entire being suffered from pain, though every part but one worked perfectly well. An injury to one part of the body is an injury to its entirety!

Friends in Christ, if we are to be the Body of Christ, we all need to understand that an injury, a slander, an insult, to one within our faith community is an injury, a slander, an insult to ourselves. The writer of Ephesians states clearly, we are ‘members of one another’. We are ourselves. In all of your interactions with your family, with your co-workers, but especially within this community of faith, let us, before we speak, ask ourselves: “Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? Is it kind?” [See your service program.]

We live in a world and a country where these questions are rarely asked, especially by our political leadership. As a community of faith, whose mandate it is to be the Body of Christ in the world, at a bare minimum, we must ask these questions of ourselves as we relate to one another as a church. If we do not, how can be the desperately needed Christ in the world?

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: “Amen”!