

“Now you are the body of Christ.” Thanks be to God for the embodiment of the Spirit through movement...As you watched their interpretation of this passage, some of you may have asked yourself...Who me?

I imagine as the Corinthian church assembled together waiting to hear Paul’s words written to them, they may have heard these words – “you are the body of Christ” – and looked at one another and wondered, who us? The body of Christ? *We’re* the body of Christ? The body of Christ, once broken and suffering. The body of Christ, now transcendent and triumphant. It is both a humbling and empowering realization: as Christians we truly share in Christ, and Christ lives in and through us. This is good news of the gospel is that God indeed was made flesh and dwells among us. And continues to dwell among us. Christ isn’t *just* living in me, or in you, but in our common life.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul lamented the divisions that existed within their community and repeatedly called them to remember their unity, and live together with a common mind and purpose. From this letter, we can see that this early church fought over who baptized them, who was the wisest, they went to court to settle disputes, and instead of sharing at the Lord’s table some went hungry. To say to this rag-tag community of followers “you are the body of Christ” was not simply naming a goal for them to attain. Paul didn’t say, you should be the body of Christ, or start acting like the body of Christ, or shape up! But “you are the body of Christ.” In the midst of their divisions, arguments and conflicts, through God’s creative and saving grace, the very body of Christ.

As Paul reminded them, in their baptism, they were made to drink of one Spirit. By virtue of our baptism, by the power of that same Spirit we too are joined together with a community of faith. As we heard last week in the story of Jesus’ baptism by John, Jesus heard the voice of God calling, “You are my son, the beloved, *I love you*, with you I am well pleased.” In our baptism we are called ‘beloved.’ We recall God is always first reaching out in love to us, and we promise to respond and be shaped by that love as we live, as individuals and a community, following Christ. Baptism is a community event, we all participate, we all promise and renew our promises to follow Christ – together, as a community. In baptism we celebrate and recall God’s very act of creation: God called forth light and life from the deep dark waters, and made humankind *in God’s own image*. So in baptism we are made new creations, giving ourselves and our lives to join God’s unfolding creation.

And it is in this way that we are gathered into the body of Christ, called into the Beloved Community, to borrow the language of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. And on this weekend in which we remember the gift Dr. King gave to us all through his faithful witness, at the same time we are painfully aware that the work of building the Beloved Community is not finished. Thanks be to God, we have come a long way. Thanks be to God that in our nation people of all colors enjoy the rights and privileges of free people. Thanks be to God that the wall of racial division that separates us is crumbling, and that greater understanding and reconciliation has emerged.

But as Dr. King knew all too well, the work is not finished. Dr. King didn't stop when the bus boycott was over, he didn't stop when the Civil Rights Bill was passed, because the Beloved Community needs building wherever we find that people are separated one from another, the Beloved Community needs building whenever we see violence tearing apart families and communities. And indeed this day, the Beloved Community needs some building, because we are separated one from another across the world: nation against nation, religion against religion. We are separated one from another across this nation. As we see illustrated in red and blue colors across our nation's map we are politically polarized and our divisions have been manifested in tragic violence like we saw in Tuscon last week.

Paul Krugman, wrote a piece in the New York Times Op-Ed section, in which he notes the deep nature about our divisions, which drive to the heart of our very values and morals. He notes this is not an easy issue, "the great divide in our politics isn't really about pragmatic issues, about which policies work best, it's about differences in [our] moral imaginations." We are deeply divided, our divisions break apart to uncover the worst in us.

We are divided as a church. For years our own PC(USA) has grappled with issues of what it means to be church – we are divided over the issue of ordination of gay and lesbian persons, we are divided over ecumenical involvement and social action. Each year churches leave the denomination – further fragmenting our witness and deteriorating our shared life.

In the face of these real and bitter divisions, what does it mean to talk about unity? In the wake of tragic violence how can we speak of reconciliation? Dr. King had a favorite quote he would often use, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." However long it takes, no matter how much struggle or how dark the night seems, we are bending, we are being shaped, into the Beloved Community. I must admit in the face of today's climate of polarization, and in the wake of this tragic violence, I am shaken. I mourn, I despair. But I remember that it is not my strength that keeps me going, it is not my power that will change the world or build the Beloved Community – it is

God's. The words of the hymn sing to me, "This is my Father's world, oh let me ne'er forget that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."

Yes, God! God who created us in this beautiful diversity, God is here in our midst as we struggle. God mourns with us, God binds us and heals us, and God always pushes us onward. Onward to build the Beloved Community, even when we seem most broken.

As Mr. Krugman noted in his article how different we are, even down to our core, our very moral imaginations. But building the Beloved Community is not about making us into people who are all the same! The apostle Paul affirmed the essential gift of diversity – we are not all the same, we are not all eyes or all feet, that is to say, that we do not possess the same spiritual gifts, not all prophesy, not all preach, not all heal, not all speak in tongues. So we're different! And our differences mean that we don't always agree. But the problem isn't that we disagree, it's how we behave when we disagree. Mr. Krugman searches for a word to offer and notes, "each side in the debate passionately believes that the other side is wrong. And it's all right for them to say that. What's not acceptable is the kind of violence and eliminationist rhetoric encouraging violence that has become all too common."

This fall, the Session of this church came together to think and pray about how we live together, how we work together, how we participate in God's mission together. And we created the Behavioral Covenant, that you find included in the bulletin today, and that you've hopefully seen also in our newsletter and heard highlighted in Minutes for Mission. This morning we used sections of it in our Call to Worship and Prayer of Confession. Because it is a tool for us, it helps us identify the ways we can live together, it takes as a given that we are going to live together – because we're the body of Christ. We're not going to be the body of Christ, we don't just aim to be the body of Christ, we are the body of Christ here together in this place. So this covenant gives us ground rules for our common life, a foundation to build on. A way that we can move forward to build each other up, to build up the ministry of Christ in this place, rather than tearing down.

Paul was interested in this same thing for his Corinthian church and after pointing out the gift of diversity in naming the various gifts of the Spirit, and how they work together as a whole in the body of Christ, he gives over a whole section to *how* they work together.

Ch 13:1-6, If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

The point is you can prophesy, and preach and teach and heal and speak in tongues all you want, but if love is not there to bind them together, we are nothing.

Dr. King spoke of this kind of love in responding to a question posed to him in 1957, “Can love really solve the racial problem?” And he wrote, “I am convinced that love is the most durable power in the world. It is not an expression of impractical idealism; but of practical realism. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, love is an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization. To return hate for hate does nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Someone must have sense enough and religion enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil, and this can only be done through love. Moreover, love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the “fight fire with fire” method which you suggest is bitterness and chaos; the aftermath of the love method is reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes love-which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies-is the solution to the race problem. Often love is crucified and buried in a grave, but in the long run it rises up and redeems even that which crucifies it.” (*Ebony*, “Advice for Living,” 1957)

Love is the ultimate tool for building the Beloved Community, hate and violence tear down. This realization was at the heart of Dr. King’s vision. After observing the struggle for India’s independence, and learning from Gandhi, he wrote, “I left India more convinced than ever before that nonviolent resistance was the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. It was a marvelous thing to see the amazing results of a nonviolent campaign. India won her independence, but without violence on the part of Indians. The aftermath of hatred and bitterness that usually follows a violent campaign was found nowhere in India. The way of acquiescence leads to moral and spiritual suicide. The way of violence leads to bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. But the way of nonviolence leads to redemption and the creation of the beloved community.”

Love is the mortar that binds all of us together, and holds firm our efforts to build the Beloved Community, and nonviolence and reconciliation is the process we go about employing our tools, giving our gifts and ourselves in building the Beloved Community. But you know, the kind of love that challenges and questions power and calls out injustice, is not always easy.

It was not an easy road for Dr. King, and it was not an easy road for those who followed his dream, for those who worked with him and so many others in the struggle for civil rights. Dr. King would often say that it takes courage and strength to love. In fact, one of his finest collection of

sermons is published under that very title, *Strength to Love*. I draw strength and inspiration as I recall the courage of my grandfather, who was a Presbyterian minister, who served St. Paul Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina from 1958 to 1988. In my growing up, I would hear stories from my father of what it was like to be a young person as the Greensboro schools slowly began the process of integration. Daddy remembers when he was in middle school, the school board made a decision that resulted in greater integration in the schools, a decision which created much controversy and was not popular in many circles. The Session of St. Paul Presbyterian Church came together to adopt a formal statement in support of the School Board, and voted to welcome all people into their congregation regardless of race. And in order to take steps toward understanding and reconciliation, my grandfather along with other members of the church organized dialogue groups to build relationships between people of different races. Daddy again remembers that his parents sat he and his sister down one night and explained to them that they were going to have some guests over for dinner, some friends from the African-American United Presbyterian congregation nearby, and that if anyone in the neighborhood should say anything mean or insulting, to ignore that and remember this: we are doing this because it is our faith and Jesus us calls to love everyone, this is how we follow Christ and show God's love.

It's not an easy road. We do not face the same challenges as a generation ago, but we still face divisions, we face violence, we face that which threatens to tear us apart and tear us down. But because of our faith, we continue to love. We continue to build the Beloved Community. So let us employ our tools for building, and in the words of our Behavioral Covenant, let us truly listen with an open heart and non-judgmental mind, let us share who we are and what we believe honestly and openly, let us identify and address the conflicts trusting that the power of those conflicts to tear us apart is not as strong as God's power to make us the body of Christ, and with us build the Beloved Community here on earth.