

Ephipany 3C, Jan 24, 2009
1 Corinthians 12:12-31
Luke 4:14-21

“An Inescapable Network of Mutuality” -MLK

I was riding with some members of the congregation to a basketball game last week and weaved throughout our entire conversation were those little snippets of information that drive most kids crazy. You know what I'm talking about - those times when **normal conversation** is interrupted by questions like,

“Wasn't that aunt Betty's second cousin?”

“No that was her sister. “

“You mean aunt Betty's sister or the cousin's sister? Cause I'm pretty sure Betty didn't have a sister... unless of Anna Smith...you know the one who lives over in ah... ah..”

“Hastings?”

“Yes... No...Holdredge!... maybe... well it doesn't really matter where she lives I guess, but I think she might be a sister.”

“Didn't she used to live in that place across from the café where... umh... oh who's that guy's who always sits in church right next to the aisle in the back and sings loud?”

And about at this point some kid usually shouts out, “Who cares!” Sound familiar? Sooner or later we all find ourselves doing this, very often unconsciously. Why do we do this? I think **we are rehearsing our connections**. This epiphany came to me as we traveling along the road to the basketball game the other day, and we met a vehicle.

Zoooooooom. It went by. A second of silence and then “that” conversation started up again about the unknown person in the truck!

“Didn't so-n-so used to have a truck like that?”

“Yeah I think he's the guy who used to have that auction business over by Yankton but I thought he sold his truck to Harvey's half brother Ted .. you know the guy who always takes up two parking spots by the grocery store.....”

An on and on it goes!! It may seem that we are talking about other people but in reality, I believe we are talking about ourselves. We are rehearsing our connections, replaying our relationships to one another, and in the process are **re-membering who we are**.

In many ways we exist as an intersection of relationships, a web of connections. Like a spider on a giant web, we are constantly trying to maintain all the connections that are necessary to us. Martin Luther King Jr. poetically phrases this truth like this:

“Humanity is caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”

“I” makes no sense without “we”.

“You” can't happen without “me”.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu made the same point with these words:

One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu - the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality - Ubuntu - you are known for your generosity....We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.

This is the essential nature of human existence Paul was trying to communicate to the people in the city of Corinth. They were allowing their differences to separate them. Paul was trying to explain that in those very differences was a essential UNITY that served as the basis for real living!

The people of Corinth were a sick body. They had a bad case of *sin cancer*. We often use the word "sin" to describe an immoral act. It was a *sin* for me to take that piece of bubble gum from the store when I was a kid. It is a *sin* to lie to your parents, (or your kids or to the government). But sin is actually much deeper and more sinister than that. It is more than what we do or don't do. It is a condition we are afflicted with.

The true nature of sin is a lack of connection, a broken relationship, with God and with one another. **Sin tries to convince us that we can go it alone.** Sin cuts us off from our fellow members and from the body itself. It *seems* like we are taking care of ourselves but the opposite is actually true. That is why it is so deadly. Sin is not just a mistake we make or a law we break. It is an amputation from the rest of the body.

Martin Luther understood the deep and deadly consequences of sin. He described it as **life curved in upon itself**. We tend to our own needs. We keep a tight reign on our money and resources. We are quick to judge. We don't respond to the suffering or the rejoicing of others. We tell ourselves we are "free" and "independent" but we are really **trapped** in a selfish bubble of our own making and we have no power to break out.

The words roll easily off our lips: "We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." But they should bring us to our knees like the hearing of the law caused the people of Ezra's day to weep and grieve. Sin is a hopeless condition that we cannot fix by just "doing the right thing." The **cure** is much more drastic. We need to be **reattached to the body**.

This is what Paul is trying to tell the Corinthians. Body parts, without the body, are pretty much useless. And a body, without the diversity of many different parts, cannot function in any meaningful way. **We are complete and whole human beings only when we live with one another in a dance of dependency.** I am because WE are! Ubuntu! This is real life and this is the great gift God gives us through Jesus Christ. Through a gift of pure grace, God forgives our sin and reattaches us to the body of Jesus who alone connects us to the source of life and healing and hope.

I've been thinking about just what that means this week. A question that I cannot get out of my head is, "What if Paul really meant what he said?" What if all this talk about bodies and parts is not just a nice little metaphor or convenient example? What if we really are, in some kind of real way, the **body of Christ** and individually members of it? What kind of body would we be?

The words in Luke's gospel paint a vivid picture of the body of Jesus. Jesus was a body with a mission, a body who announces good news to the poor, proclaims release to the captives, gives sight to the blind, and let's the oppressed go free. If we are the body of Christ, **should not our mission be about those same things?** It is time to let God pop the bubbles we surround ourselves with and open us up, curve us out, so that we can fully live in the interconnected web of life. It is a

leap of faith and it may seem scary and feel vulnerable but it is the only way we can really be alive in this world.

These connections happen in all kinds of surprising ways, of course, but almost all of them start with recognizing that our **differences are not a cause for division but rather a source of creative possibilities**. The people of Haiti are not under some kind of curse. They are the victims of a horrendous tragedy and as fellow members of the same body we suffer with them. But as members of the same body, all the parts work together to heal the wounds we suffer. That is what we do when we pledge our financial support, pray for all those affected, and advocate for a fair and just rebuilding of the country.

But it is not just the members of the body far away in Haiti that we are connected to. **Every** single person we encounter this week, **every** family member we talk to, **every** customer we work with, **every** student we teach, **every** child we love, **every** friendship we nurture, **every** word or action of kindness will change the destiny of the entire world! This is the awesome nature of living in the “inescapable network of mutuality” that MLK jr. so poetically penned. We are freed by God to be fully alive, to risk loving and being in relationships of trust. And we are forgiven so that we might in turn forgive others when those connections of trust are broken. Hope is never lost. The chance to begin anew is always present. Let us go out today, living with that hope and living as the body of Christ for the world.