



September 26th, 2021

Gifts of the Pandemic (IV): Being (Inter)Connected

***Twin Towers United Methodist Church
1411 Oak Street, Alameda, CA 94501***

510.522.6744 twintowers.office@gmail.com www.twintowersumc.org

WORSHIP GUIDE

Before you begin your time of worship, find a comfortable place to be and gather whatever you might need: your Bible, candles, something to write on and with, your computer/connected device (if you intend to listen to music online), etc. Feel free to adapt this worship guide in any way that makes best sense to you and those you might be gathered with. (Consider inviting someone – a friend, a family member – to worship with you.) Commit to spending the next hour with God.

PRELUDE - Listen and sing along to a song or hymn that blesses and centers your spirit!

WELCOME – (from <http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocC/C51sun22.htm>)

God has gathered us to this place,
**where we hear those stories which show us
what the kingdom of God is like.**
God summons us to this place,
**where we can learn how to serve our God
without reservation, or hesitation.**
God will send us from this place,
**to tell others of God's hopes and dreams,
so they, too, can know and experience the love of God.**

OPENING PRAYER - (adapted from *Ministrymatters.com*)

Let us join our hearts and spirits in prayer:

Welcoming God, you have blessed us with so many gifts,
chief among them the gift of yourself,
your presence moving through our lives,
your vision that crafts our sense of the world,
and your call to partner in healing the world with your love.
In this time of worship, may we be open to receiving these gifts.
Help us claim our gifts and use them to bring liberation and justice to a hurting world.
May the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable to you.
May the transforming Spirit of joy and unity bind us together as your body,
that we may be your hands and feet and voice in this, your world. Amen.

OPENING HYMN - “Welcome”, W&S 3152

Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLomSmDyfsA>

Let's walk together for a while
and ask where we begin
to build a world where love can grow
and hope can enter in,
to be the hands of healing
and to plant the seed of peace,

Refrain:

singing welcome, welcome to this place.
You're invited to come
and know God's grace.
All are welcome
the love of God to share
'cause all of us are welcome here;
all are welcome in this place.

2. Let's talk together of a time
when we will share a feast,
where pride and power
kneel to serve the lonely and the least,
and joy will set the table
as we join our hands to pray,
refrain

3. Let's dream together of the day
when earth and heaven are one,
a city built of love and light,
the new Jerusalem,
where our mourning turns to dancing,
every creature lifts its voice,
refrain

SCRIPTURE - I Corinthians 12:12-27 [NRSV]

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

This is the Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God!**

LISTEN -

Rugged individualism.

Those two little words are said to be at the core of our identity and culture as Americans. Some have even posited that they are a part of our very DNA.

It all began, or so the story goes, with the frontier spirit, that spirit that propelled settlers across the vast frontier westward, away from the familiar, the safe, the known, away from family and community, and into the “wild”, the unknown, and the “unsettled.” This was thought of as a matter of destiny, manifest destiny, on which the nation’s health and well-being, its progress and prosperity hung. Settlers set off fueled by the quest for more, for better, for a piece of land to call their own, for an economic opportunity that would move them towards wealth. Throughout this very uncertain and dangerous journey, settlers depended on themselves for their survival and well-being. They had to! They were setting off, on their own, with only their hopes and dreams, their courage and perseverance and very little else. (Or so goes the story.)

By the time Herbert Hoover came onto the scene in the early 1900’s and coined the term, rugged individualism, our country seemed fully convinced of the absolute sacredness of personal rights, personal liberty, a deep sense of independence, as well as the honoring of self-sufficiency, self-reliance and resourcefulness above all. We were a people that cleaved fiercely to what we considered “God-given rights”, did not want to be bound by other people’s rules, by interference into our “private lives”, nor to be called to accountability for anybody else. We refused to be hindered by the needs of others or be responsible for their supposed “bad choices.” In a now famous campaign speech, Hoover lauded “rugged individualism” for enabling Americans to have “grown into unparalleled greatness” built on “individual initiative and enterprise”. Everyone but everyone was expected to “pull themselves up by their own bootstraps” because this was, indeed, the land of endless opportunity. Hoover warned that any threat to individualism was a threat to our progress and our greatness, individually and as a nation.

Might you agree? Given that individualism is woven into the very fabric of our national story, reinforced in all sorts of ways all around us, even, sometimes, by the church, we would be wise to pause and come to clarity: what do we make of individualism, you and I? Do we hold to its ideals? How is it aligned - or not - with being followers of Jesus and lovers of God? We might also wonder what is on the other side, the alternative, of this rugged individualism?

Thomas Merton, the great American mystic, theologian, and activist from the early part of the 20th century, named individualism a “heresy”, a false teaching, if you would, an idea that goes against the very gospel of Jesus. Countless others would agree with him, pointing to individualism as fundamentally unbiblical and “foreign to the Christian faith.” Instead, the biblical witness from beginning to end, they’d argue, is about God calling forth a people, journeying with them, liberating them, fashioning them into a community faithful to God’s love and purposes for the world, restoring them. While Jesus comes to each of us as individuals, yes, we who are “called and claimed by God’s love... enter indissolubly into the community of God’s people.” We no longer live unto ourselves, but as connected, even interconnected beings - with God and with one another. We, in fact, understand ourselves, know ourselves to be one body even as we are many members.

The fact that we are one body, interconnected, has been made startling clear over the last year, not primarily by Paul’s writing (although he does do his very best, doesn’t he?), but by this global pandemic that has left no one and nowhere untouched. The pandemic has made it impossible to overlook: We are not disconnected individuals. Our choices, our decisions, our actions never affect and impact only ourselves. What we choose for ourselves can and does harm others, beloved others as well as strangers and those thought of as far afield. Our personal rights and freedoms do not and cannot trump the needs and the well-being of the whole, or we will die...and many - far too many - have died. We are, like it or not, in this together! And so the fourth gift of the pandemic that I would like to raise up for us to consider this morning is the truth and the beauty of our God-given interconnectedness, not just as a church, not just with other Christians, but with all of humanity. Let’s pray.

Just about a year ago, some five months into sheltering in place, we grabbed a hold of this passage from I Corinthians and we worked it. We worked it together for 5 solid weeks asking again and again and again the ancient question, “Are we each other’s keepers?” Did we have responsibility towards, accountability for, commitment towards each other? Who were we as a community - a collection of individuals, or something more? How is it that we were all connected, or not? The pandemic had forced upon us - every single one of us - a confrontation with the founding values of this nation, values that have, frankly, seeped into the church. Were all the various mandates an intrusion into our “God-given” rights and freedoms, or were they a concrete way to love our neighbors as ourselves? Were they an affront to our individual choice, or essential for communal well-being and protecting of the most vulnerable among us? We sought guidance from Paul, sensing that this passage offered us compelling food for thought and faithful input.

Paul offers here - and in 3 of his other letters - an image to help the church understand itself and the relationships. You might remember me celebrating Paul’s brilliance because he offered this

image of a diverse but unified body in a very subversive and counter-cultural way. Other writers in the Greco-Roman world, especially politicians and philosophers, had also used the image. But all those other writers and thinkers used it to support and reinforce the social hierarchy of the time. Let me explain: just as every body needed a head, they argued, so does society, and thus we have the wealthy, the ruling class, the elite. And since every body needed hands and feet to get things done, well, so too, society, and thus we have everyone else laboring away, taking on the hard and dirty work. The image made it crystal clear why some people were at the top, and others were not; why some were worthy of respect, and others were not; why some were dispensable, and some were not. Put simply, for the average Greco-Roman writer and thinker, the body was the perfect image to justify hierarchy, inequality, and discrimination. That is exactly not Paul's point!

Paul places the image of the body before the church precisely to challenge our penchant to rank and value people differently; to include some, and exclude others; to honor and respect some, and utterly ignore and neglect others. Paul turns the conventional line of thinking on its head and uses the image for a wholly different vision: one in which every single part, no matter its apparent significance or insignificance, belongs and is cared for. In fact, he takes it farther than that. Paul makes a case for the "indispensability" of the "weaker", the "less honorable", or "less respectable" parts of the body, and calls for "greater honor" and "greater respect" precisely for these parts. (As an aside, Paul's point here is precisely in line with Jesus' witness and ministry, and we would do well as a church to do some serious thinking about how we are, or are not, living into this challenging truth.) Paul resists and disrupts any sort of hierarchy and instead holds in front of us an image of deep unity bound by authentic and empathetic care. Moreover, and to our point today, this image enables Paul to roundly reject the idea that any one part, one member, could legitimately and logically pull away from the whole, from the body. In fact, he makes clear our saying so doesn't make it so: "If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body" (vs. 15-16). We might be many members, but there is no denying that we are connected as one body. This is a gift (and a challenge) we have in and through Christ. It is Jesus that binds us into one.

And while I realize that Paul is writing to the church - the church in Corinth, to be exact - about the church, I believe that in and through Jesus, the one who was sent to the world as the embodiment of God's love for the world, we are bound into one not with just the church - with each other - but that we are bound into one body with all humanity, with the very world that God so loved. Anything less doesn't make sense to me, scripturally, theologically, logically, or experientially. Bonnie Thurston, a professor of theology at Wheeling Jesuit College writes, "We

are made of humus, dirt, earth; the same basic stuff is the human lowest common denominator. By virtue of our creatureliness we are already one. We, together, are the people whom God created, whose flesh [God] took on and for whose sins [God] died. Whether we are male or female, rich or poor, black or white, straight or gay, we are already one in the God Who created us and the Christ Who redeemed us and the Holy Spirit Who maintains us in Being.”

The global pandemic has, like Paul’s image, made clear how interconnected we all are in so, so many ways. What a gift, especially for us here in the United States, steeped in the false teachings and worship of individualism. I am so grateful and so proud of this community, for consistently and faithfully seeking out the well-being of the body: you do so by wearing masks and sewing them for others, by getting vaccinated (if you’re able to), and by finding alternative (new!) ways to worship, connect, and do ministry that seeks to include everyone and keep everyone safe. You have also been open to learning about systemic racism and your part in it, about the housing crisis here in the Bay Area and what we might be able to do about it, and you are consistently generous, releasing resources to wildfire victims, earthquake survivors, unhoused neighbors, and more. This is to be celebrated, Friends! And so as we move towards a time beyond the pandemic, it is my prayer that we continually deepen our recognition of our interconnectedness and listen - always listen - for the Spirit’s beckoning to repair and to heal the body, but also to stand guard against attempts to break or diminish our sacred connection. Amen.

SONG OF RESPONSE/MEDITATION - How Can I Keep From Singing, TFWS 2212

Listen and watch here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li2hddmy63U>

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE – *Spend time in prayer. What did you hear for yourself through today’s scripture and reflection? Talk to God about it. Then lift up the joys and concerns that are in your heart. You might write them down, speak them aloud, or pray for them in silence.*

We would be honored to pray with you and for you.

Please send a note via text, mail, or email or give a call to our Healing Prayer Team.

SHARING OUR GIFTS– *How might you offer yourself and all that you have to God this week? How are you being invited to practice generosity? Spend a moment listening for God’s direction.*

You are invited to contribute financially towards the purpose and ministry of TTUMC. We are a congregation committed to being conduits of God’s healing in our neighborhood and beyond, and

in so doing, impact the last and the least. You can contribute by mailing in a check, dropping off cash, or giving online (visit www.twintowersumc.org). Take a moment and do that now.

CLOSING HYMN - “For Everyone Born”, W&S 3149, vs. 1, 3, 5

Listen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gmle0svKuQc>

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born,
clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space,
a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead.

3. For young and for old,
a place at the table,
a voice to be heard, a part in the song,
the hands of a child
in hands that are wrinkled,
for young and for old, the right to belong.

Refrain

And God will delight
when we are creators of justice and joy,
yes, God will delight
when we are creators of justice,
justice and joy!

5. For everyone born, a place at the table,
to live without fear, and simply to be,
to work, to speak out,
to witness and worship,
for everyone born, the right to be free.

BENEDICTION - [Nathan Nettleton @ www.laughingbird.net]

Go now, and live as one body in Christ.

Be at peace, and care for one another;

Suffer with one another and rejoice with one another.

Give your attention to the Word of God and proclaim the good news of freedom to all.

And may God delight your heart and sharpen your vision;

May Christ Jesus keep you, thought and word, in his grace;

And may the Holy Spirit be the fountain that sustains you all and binds you together as one.

NOW GO AND PASS CHRIST’S PEACE!

NEXT WEEK’S SCRIPTURE: Philippians 1:1-11

Please make note of these warm invites and gentle reminders:

- **Would you like to grow roots in and through the Twin Towers community?** Are you feeling called to make an intentional commitment to participate, grow, and give in and through this faith community? Do you want to explore what that might look like? If you

answered “Yes!” to any of the above, please connect! A conversation is beginning and you are invited!

- **World Communion Sunday Joint Worship Celebration** - Please mark your calendars to celebrate World Communion Sunday on **Oct. 3rd** with our siblings at Chinese Community, Lake Merritt, and Lake Park UMC's. You are invited to attend in person at Lake Merritt UMC OR online (link to follow). Worship will begin at **10:30 a.m.**

Peace,

Emily