

From Pastor Heather

Our Bishop Speaks for Me

"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. 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.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to 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 were to 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. 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? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 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; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

I Corinthians 12:12-26 (NRSV)

One of the greatest challenges to our United Methodist Church is currently under global consideration. We will gather as a worldwide denomination in February in St. Louis to truly determine our collective future. Our ability to fulfill our mission of disciple-making for the transformation of the world, and our witness to the world of the saving grace and loving compassion of God is at stake.

Spiritual leaders throughout our church are calling United Methodists everywhere to make a commitment to the unity of faith in Jesus Christ and the continued positive impact of our theological and missional work in the world. To the consternation of many, our "unity" has become a topic of debate and division. This indicates a deep misunderstanding of "unity" as used in our Christian scriptures. The Greek word Ενότητα (enotita) is more rich and complex than the English translation unity. By applying simplistic modern definitions to the word unity, we can deny the scriptural intention, which has great power to help us through our current challenges.

Many opponents to the idea of unity in The United Methodist Church incorrectly say it implies full agreement, lack of disagreement, regimented acceptance of a narrow set of moral standards, or homogenized sameness for all believers and members. Interestingly, this is almost the opposite of what Paul and Jesus taught in our New Testament.

While Paul calls those who claim Christ as Lord and Savior to be of one heart and mind, and to proclaim the faith with one accord, his intention is that Christ followers would choose to unite around those things most important, and to set aside those things over

which they disagreed. Repeatedly, Paul acknowledges that there will be disagreements. It is not disagreement that is the problem, but how we address our disagreements that is most important. No matter how vehemently we disagree, our baptism, our belief in the risen Christ, and our proclamation of the love and grace of God is more powerful. We do not choose unity; we are already made one with Christ, one with each other, and one in service by God's redeeming act through Christ. We do not unite to honor God; we honor God by recognizing the unifying work of God in our lives through our faith. Once again, we do not choose God; God chooses us! What we choose is how we will live this unity together.

This is the elegant and beautiful intention in Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 12. We ARE ONE BODY – the body of Christ. Many parts, many functions, many differences, but still all one. No part of the body may judge and reject any other part of the body. And it is not our task to merely tolerate the other parts of the body, but to come to recognize their value and to honor those we struggle to accept.

Some say that Jesus said he did not come to bring peace, but to bring a sword of division and dissolution. This is a skewed interpretation. The division that Jesus brought was from one paradigm to another – a fundamental and defining faith different and separate from that which was the accepted norm. People were forced to choose to remain in the old paradigm or to bravely and boldly risk entering a new paradigm. The reality was that this would divide families, tribes, communities, and cultures. It was not a justification of splitting over disagreement, but an honest acknowledgment that an "either/or" decision was demanded.

In our context, we are trying to decide which Christian brothers and sisters are acceptable and which we will not accept. This is not our decision to make; it belongs to God and God alone. Our decision is how we can live faithfully with those who are different; how we can honor the sacrament of baptism and what God has done for all of us, not just some of us; and, how we can witness to the world that when Christ is truly in our hearts, we navigate disagreement and division in ways very different from our dominant culture.

Our unity is a gift and grace to us from God. God makes us one. We can always choose to separate and go our way, rejecting what God has done for us, but we do not have the right to tell someone else they do not belong. John Wesley offered the simplest and most helpful wisdom when he wrote, schism is "...evil in itself. To separate ourselves from a body of living Christians with whom we were before united is a grievous breach of the law of love. It is the nature of love to unite us together, and the greater the love the stricter the union...It is only when our love grows cold that we can think of separating from our brethren. And this is certainly the case with any who willingly separate from their Christian brethren. The pretenses for separation may be innumerable, but want of love is always the real cause." (On Catholic Spirit, John Wesley)

Let us pray that our General Conference delegates might discern and embrace the sacred gift of unity that is the core characteristic of our identity as the Christian church, and that we might honor God by being the body of Christ for the transformation of our world.

Grace and Peace,
Bishop Hee-Soo Jung