**A More Excellent Way**

Psalm 19:1-6  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Let me ask you for your opinion. Do you think a Local Legend should have to clean the bathroom? I am asking a serious question here.

We had gotten up early last Monday for the Martin Luther King, Jr breakfast. We had a nice breakfast that was prepared by women from Our Lady of Guadalupe. We were looking forward to the speech by former Governor of Massachusetts, Deval Patrick. But, before the speech Jill Jackson was asked to come forward and Jill proceeded to introduce me as this year’s Local Legend recipient.

Now, I know this honor has more to do with Cherokee Park United as a community of faith than anything I have done. Pretty much everything that could be sited about me is really the work of this church.

Hosting community artists, community forums on a wide variety of topics including one to be hosted tomorrow by the Outreach Ministry on birds and climate change, one this spring on being a Transgender ally and another this spring hosted by the antiracism team on the case for renaming Indigenous names. Loaves and Fishes is led by the Justice and Witness Ministry Team. Property management provided leadership on the solar panels and the rain garden, all reflecting care for the earth in our neighborhood. I am more than aware that I am getting credit for the work of this church.

All the same, I am the one who was named Local Legend. You weren’t. So, when we got home from the breakfast, I assumed that being named Local Legend would come with some privileges, like not having to clean the bathroom. Apparently Michele missed the fine print in the MLK program. One of the first things she said to me was “the tub needs to be cleaned.” The tub is worse than the toilet. You have to bend way over and scrub the grime.

Our text from 1 Corinthians is written by the Apostle Paul to Christians in Corinth, some of whom also share my assumption that they should be exempt from having to clean the bathroom and a few other tasks that are below their status. According to Paul, this outlook appears to be causing some problems and tensions within the community.

Unfortunately the matter of assigning privileges based on ones status is only one of the issues at work in Corinth. The congregation is also experiencing tension and conflict stemming from the inevitable differences that are bound to exist among any group of people. Paul draws upon a popular metaphor of his day and speaks of these differences as the differences between different parts of the human body. The eye is different from the foot, the hand is different from the nose, the mouth is different from the ear and so forth. The body, says Paul, is made up of different parts and that is true for a community as well.

In our day, scholars have used psychology to expand on this basic insight named by Paul two thousand years ago. Back in the 1980’s Isabel Brigs and Peter Myer’s developed a personality inventory which came to be known as the Myers-Briggs test. They said that every person has a personality type based on contrasting ways of approaching the world. Some people approach the world as extroverts and others as introverts. Some rely heavily on intuition while others are more concrete detail oriented. Some come at the world through thinking and others lead with their heart and feelings. Some like to get things organized, make decisions and judgments, others prefer to keep things open ended, holding out for another possibility.

It is fairly easy to see how these different personality orientations within a group of people could become annoying and a source of tension. Introverts want some time to quietly think about things, but the extroverts talk their way through every issue. The introverts are annoyed that the extroverts never shut up. The extroverts are annoyed that the introverts never seem to say what is on their mind.

Those who share a Presbyterian orientation are eager to hone in on the details and get annoyed with the UCCers who seem reluctant to nail anything down. The UCCers with their tendency toward open ended possibilities get annoyed with the Presbyterians who constantly seem to be focused on doing everything decently and in order, rather than the big picture.

Myers-Briggs identifies 16 different pairings that impact how we approach the world, all of which can be a source of tension and conflict within a community. Taking a similar approach, author Corrine Ware, wrote a book in which she identified four different spiritual types, which include a head/thinking oriented spirituality, a heart/feeling oriented spirituality, a mystic/meditative oriented spirituality and a justice/doing oriented spirituality. Again, it is fairly easy to see how these different types might begin to annoy each other and become the source of tension and conflict within the community.

The mystics are quietly meditating and along come the doers, busily and somewhat noisily getting ready for the next big project. The mystic are annoyed by the disturbance. The doers are annoyed by the mystics reluctance to come help out at Loaves and Fishes. The adult forum is a particularly challenging place for the feeling and thinking people. Those who lead with their hearts are annoyed with those members who want to keep reading serious theological works. Those who are more thinking oriented get frustrated by those who want to continuously talk about how things are going in their own personal lives.

None of this is new to the Apostle Paul where tension and conflict has emerged among those who are more visual like the eye, those who are more sensing like the nose, and those who are more action oriented like the feet. Some of them have gone so far as to say they could get along just fine without those other annoying people.

Paul draws upon the metaphor of the body to remind the folks in Corinth that encountering these differences is precisely what one should expect when one becomes a part of the Body of Christ. In their work Gifts Differing and in her work Discover Your Spiritual Types, authors Myers, Briggs and Ware, all assert the resolution to this tension and conflict is by coming to appreciate, rather than simply be frustrated by the differing perspectives and orientations in the community. The introverts have something to share with the extroverts and vice-versa. Those who hone in on the details have something to share with those who like the big picture and vise-versa. The feeling spiritual types have something to share with the thinking spiritual types and vise-versa.

The apostle Paul, speaking with the same insight as modern day psychologists says, “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 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. 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?”

It is a crucial insight then and now for any community of faith seeking to truly be the body of Christ, giving witness to the Realm of God’s justice. But, appreciating one another’s gifts, rather than constantly be annoyed is only part of the challenge for the people in Corinth and for us. The other challenge is who cleans the bathrooms?

To most people in Paul’s day and frankly most people in our day the answer to that question is obvious. The people who clean the bathroom are the ones with the least amount of social status. The body was a well known metaphor for social relationships precisely because it was employed to reinforce social hierarchy. The head was the top and in charge of all decisions. Other body parts carried out those decisions. The lesser body parts, the ones we hide, carried out the menial, essential functions, which of course, include not only using the bathroom, but cleaning the bathroom. The body metaphor meant that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy were expected to obey and support those above them. In Paul’s day the hierarchy was reflected in the status given to military, political and religious elites.

We have, of course, added to and expanded these relationships of hierarchy. Gender hierarchy existed then as it does now. But, during the era of enlightenment European thinkers came up with various rationales for defining and justifying a racial hierarchy, which during the colonial era was imposed on much of the rest of the world. The lighter your skin, the higher you are on the racial hierarchy, the darker your skin the lower you are on the racial hierarchy.

The Apostle Paul is writing to people for whom the body metaphor was used to justify a hierarchy of status and privilege. Rather than turn away from the metaphor, Paul gives the metaphor a revolutionary new twist when he says, “the members of the body that seem weaker are indispensible, and those members 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.

As one commentator notes, “According to Paul’s analogy, the assertion of superiority is ridiculous…Paul uses the figure of the body to advance a rationale for diversity and interdependence with a strongly egalitarian thrust.”

Paul’s use of the body metaphor turns social hierarchy upside down . It is a direct challenge to economic systems that provide outsized pay to those at the top and devalues those at the bottom. It is a direct challenge to racial stratification and its persistent legacy, underscoring why antiracism work is so fundamental to being the body of Christ. Paul’s body metaphor breaks down gender distinctions, exclusions, privilege and superiority.

For the Apostle Paul this way of living is what it means to be in Christ, one in the spirit, the body of Christ. This is the way of love rather domination and Paul refers to it as the more excellent way.

For the Apostle Paul, it is essential that the church put this more excellent way into practice. It is by giving witness to this more excellent way of being that the church brings a direct challenge to Roman hierarchy, gender hierarchy, racial hierarchy and all forms of domination. It is this more excellent way that enables us to welcome the insights and gifts of other faith traditions, knowing that the spirit of unity dwells in all people, who know God by many names.

This Friday Michele and I celebrate our 33 anniversary. Local Legend or not, a happy marriage, a healthy community is one that sees our differences as a gift, lets go of the status and embraces the more excellent way of love. You may have to clean the bathroom now and then, but according to Paul and I would agree, it is well worth it.

**Psalm 19:1-6**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist reminds us that no one has an exclusive understanding of who God is, because all of creation speaks about and reveals the presence of God.*

The heavens are telling  the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech,  nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out  through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens God has set a tent  for the sun, which comes out like a beloved from a wedding canopy, and like an athlete runs its course with joy. Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

*In our second lesson Paul writes to the church in Corinth who are experiencing conflict among their members. There are divisions among various groups and there are some who consider themselves superior to others. Paul utilizes the well know metaphor of the body in a radically new way, challenging the divisions that exists and calling them to live by a more excellent way.*

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 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. 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.  
  
Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.