

Paul's Theology Of Wholeness

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Chuck Currie
Parkrose Community United Church of Christ
Sunday, July 26, 2009

[1 Corinthians 12.1-27](#)

Change is in the air. Can you feel the breeze? Change is coming to this church, we know that, but change is also coming to the nation – think health care or economics and you'll know what I mean – and change is coming to the world...global warming comes to mind.

Not all change is good, mind you, but change always comes and whether we like it or not we find ourselves in a period of restless transition. As the flood waters of history come lapping at our levy walls we have to decide if we're going to try and help shape that change in positive and meaningfully ways or if we're going to resist those changes by clinging to old and outdated ways...or worse yet, succumb to the fear we naturally have of change by indiscriminately lashing out at the world around us.

These are some of the questions we face today as Christians.

The church – and by church I mean here the church universal – is in a precarious position as it relates to change.

At our best we are agents of change...born out of a faith tradition in which we are asked to literally change our lives by following the teachings of Jesus. We're asked to give up our families and embrace a larger definition of family that includes all humanity (remember the sermon we heard from Walter John Boris as it relates to this?). We're asked to give up conventional thinking in favor radical thinking. Yes, the Christian faith is a faith of change and you can see that concretely in our own national history. The American Revolution, the anti-slavery movement, the women's movement, the labor movement, the civil rights movement and the just peace movement where all shaped by and sometimes led by Christians who heard in the teachings of the prophets and in the teachings of Jesus a word of justice and liberation that sparked in them the idea that sometimes change must come to authentically bring the Kingdom a little closer to reality.

At our worst we are agents of tradition – bound by ritual and lacking in faith. In a religion as old as ours the trap of tradition can catch us as easily as a fly is trapped by the web of a spider. Religions that put tradition above change expose themselves as agents of the status quo. God bemoans such thinking in Scripture and we should aspire to better thinking here. Tradition has much to teach us, I would not argue differently, but it cannot be the only pillar on which we build our house.

Paul knew about this dilemma – about the battle for change vs. tradition. After all, he was a man of tradition who saw the change embodied by the followers of Jesus as a radical threat to the status quo. And so he participated in the persecution of the followers of Jesus until he had his own transformative experience with the Risen Christ. From that moment on he was forever changed. Paul saw the world anew and knew that the brokenness exhibited by humanity was not what God intended for creation. In Christ, Paul would argue, we are all one. Paul preached a theology of wholeness. Hear again the concluding verses of our reading this morning from 1 Corinthians (this time, however, using Eugene Peter's translation from [The Message](#)):

A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, limpid and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it.

But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, "Get lost; I don't need you"? Or, Head telling Foot, "You're fired; your job has been phased out"? As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way—the "lower" the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in

the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

You are Christ's body—that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything.

If the theological theme of wholeness – or oneness – sounds familiar to you it should. We used this theme from Scripture and similar words from Paul in the Open and Affirming statement this congregation adopted. Listen to what the people of this church declared:

In Galatians 3.28 we are reminded that despite our differences we are all “one in Christ Jesus.” Therefore, we, the people of Parkrose Community United Church of Christ, declare ourselves to be open and affirming. With God’s grace, we seek to be a congregation that includes all persons, embracing differences of that includes all persons, embracing differences of sexual orientation, gender, marital status, age, mental and physical ability, as well as racial, ethnic, religious, political or social-economic background. We welcome all to share in the life and leadership, ministry, and fellowship, worship, sacraments, responsibilities and blessings of participation in our congregation. This is God’s church and no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.

We could have just as easily said

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.’

An amazing number of people turned out for the vote where that statement was adopted and an astonishing percentage of people – well over 90% - voted for it.

And while we have welcomed new members with joy who found in this statement new hope in Christ, we remember with sadness that some people left the church because of this vote. Those people were faithful Christians who loved the church and simply could not abide by the decision. To them we offered – and still offer – our prayers and friendship. Sometimes good and decent people simply disagree on issues of profound importance. Sometimes change creates division – ask Jesus or Paul about this – and sometimes it comes with a price. The leadership of this church and your interim pastor did everything we could to reach out to this group. Council members contacted each member of the church before the vote to hear concerns, after the vote we all prayed together for unity, members who expressed displeasure about the vote were invited in personal calls to meet face-to-face to talk about their views, and personal letters were

sent to each person who left inviting them back for Christmas Eve services that year – not to necessarily rejoin the church – but as a reminder to them that we all still considered them part of our church family regardless of any differences. Never did we entertain the possibility of dismissing these folks by said “I have no need of you.”

The Rev. John Thomas, thinking about the national setting of the United Church of Christ, [wrote in 2006](#):

It is clear that we face two kinds of critics today. There are many loving critics who care deeply for this church, seek ways to support it, and yearn for its growth and vitality. They find themselves in dissent from some of the positions of the General Synod and its leaders, finding in the Bible and the church's tradition differing understandings of how we are to view contemporary social and moral issues. We need to listen with care, humility and deep respect to these loving critics, assuring them of their honored place within the diverse life of this church, finding ways for them to support those aspects of our national and global ministries that they can fully embrace. We need to be open to the truth that they have spiritual insights to nurture, even challenge us toward greater faithfulness.

Rev. Thomas continued...

It's also the case that there are critics who do not love this church, who seek to disrupt, distract, diminish, even destroy our life. These critics, within and beyond, encourage local churches to withhold financial support of our wider ministries, offer advice and counsel on how to leave the denomination, establish parallel structures for the placement of clergy and the sending of mission personnel, and regularly disseminate deliberately misleading or false information about the denomination and its leaders. Those who love this church, and cherish its legacy, need to be clear in saying no to this form of critique which falls outside the bounds of acceptable Christian behavior.

We could make the same observation today about our local church.

Some of those who opposed our decision to become Open and Affirming retain their membership. Most still support the church by upholding their membership vows – they worship regularly, they participate fully in the life of the church, and they act as responsible stewards by supporting the church financially as they are able. For the majority this minority models an amazing richness of faith. They declare with their presence and with their gifts that division is the least acceptable alternative for those

who follow Jesus. The majority here has a lot to learn from this group of our brothers and sisters about how to handle change and about how to witness our faith. Dissent and debate can be constructive and healthy. I suspect no one here would like it if we all thought the same way and I often learn from those who approach me after sermons to offer a different take on Scripture. Loving critics are an asset to the life of the church.

Tragically, there is a much smaller group – and in most churches you find this - that fit into the second definition that Rev. Thomas offered: those who do not love the church and who seek to destroy it. You find these people writing anonymous letters, purposely spreading false or misleading information, withholding pledges, and not showing up for worship unless they feel there is a chance to further their agenda of tearing down the church. Expect to see some of these people show up in the coming weeks in an effort to tear down the progress this congregation has made on so many fronts as we seek to faithfully bring the ministries of the church into the future. While this group is very small they take up a disproportionate amount of the church's time as they seek to set the church off course and down the alley of destruction. To them, as Rev. Thomas urged, we must say “no to this form of critique which falls outside the bounds of acceptable Christian behavior.”

Even here, however, we must find ways to offer love and to promote reconciliation. We cannot simply say to this group that we have no need of you. It might be true that this place of worship is not the right place for these people to grow spiritually but we must find ways to set aside bitterness and seek reconciliation – whether or not such an offer is accepted on their part. At the same time, members who break covenant with the church by ignoring their vowed obligations at some point do forfeit their membership.

The Open and Affirming vote was not the only controversial decision made by this church in recent years. Just as difficult was the vote to better define our mission for the future, to sell our buildings, and to call a new pastor. Again, the vast majority of our members voted for this course of action. While these actions were needed to maintain the hope that the ministries of this church might continue into the future we must recognize that these decisions were still painful to some and the unknowns about our future are, I think it is fair to say, scary to all of us on different levels.

We seek change not simply for the sake of change but for the hope that the decisions made by the membership of this church will allow us to survive after a long period of decline.

Success should not be measured in membership growth alone but also in how people here deepen their faith and become better disciples – spreading the Gospel of love, kindness and justice with humble hearts.

Change is in the air and on so many levels – from the global to the personal – that one can become dizzy simply thinking about it. Hold out hope. No matter where you live or where you worship it is often in these challenging moments of change that the church acts best. Soon I will be gone –for better or worse – and it will be left up to you all to

decide with the help of a new pastor whether or not to continue on the path we have worked so hard to forge or to surrender to the pull of the status quo once again. We are a tradition that firmly believes in the “priesthood of all believers” and knowing you all I have confidence that if you all open yourselves up to the guidance of the Holy Spirit all will be well and that wholeness and change will become ideas that live together in pursuit of a common mission that boldly honors God.

Amen.