

## Who Are We, Really?

### **1 Corinthians 12:4-14**

This morning I want us to reflect on a question as the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church. As a small church in this town, affiliated with The United Methodist Church – who are we, really?

The immediate answer is that we are a group of people who believe in God in Christ, and who gather weekly to honor him and interact with our friends. That works, but obviously there is more to it than that. We might then say we are also a friendly group of people who warmly welcome anyone and everyone to our Sunday worship. That also works. Someone might offer that we are a group who want to have a positive influence on our community in God's name. Good. That also is appropriate.

Listening to this dialogue, I might then ask this question: "As a small church in this town, affiliated with the United Methodist Church, what do we stand for?" Ah, that's a different question. Now we are moving into theology. But the immediate answers are not difficult. We believe God is the creator. We believe Jesus Christ is his incarnate Son and our Lord and Savior. We believe the Holy Spirit is God with us, guiding our way. Very good, but that is only the tip of what we know and profess. Then we spend a lifetime reading the Bible, studying, serving, and deepening our faith.

If the apostle Paul was with us this morning, when I asked the question who are we really, I believe he would stand, face us, and reply simply, "You are the body of Christ." And then he would sit down.

Okay, thank you Paul. But his answer causes me to refine my question. So now I ask of us, "Who are we as the body of Christ, really?" We need to probe that question from the perspective of being United Methodists. We are not a non-descript Protestant denomination. While Christian churches generally share the basics of the faith, each denomination has its own doctrines and polity, its own unique approach to living out their faith. Our sense of what it means to be the body of Christ comes not just from Paul, but also from our founder, John Wesley. We are Wesleyan in our theology. We affirm his description of God's grace as being prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying. We adhere to his quadrilateral, wherein he said that our faith is informed by scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

The United Methodist Church has one word that foundationally describes who we are really, and that word is *connection*. We are a connectional church. Neither Paul nor Wesley used that word, but both would affirm it as descriptive of our being the body of Christ. As United Methodists each of us is connected not to just each other and this church, but to the world.

I want to share some of who we are really through the context of our Rocky Mountain Annual Conference that I attended last week. Some 600 people gathered from Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, half clergy and half laity. Our church is supposed to send a voting lay delegate to annual conference to complement the pastor. We have not done so for the past few years. We will do so next year.

On Thursday evening the conference had a memorial service with Holy Communion. Those clergy who had died in the past year were eulogized. As the name and biography of my seminary mentor and class advisor was lifted, I stood in silent testimony to my connection with him and the influence he had had on my life.

Annual Conference is a blend of stimulating worship, inspiring preaching, and, oh my, the singing, and of course doing legislative work. One of our guest preachers was a black minister who co-pastors with his wife a 12,000 member United Methodist Church in Houston. Twenty years ago they had nine members. Their church was founded with only one purpose – to minister to the poor and broken. They feed hundreds daily, sponsor recovery groups, and minister to those who need it the most. If you visit St. John's UMC you may find yourself sitting between a lady wearing a mink coat and a man who is wearing the only clothes he owns. All are welcome there. They are the body of Christ.

The other guest preacher wasn't a United Methodist. He was the president of the Council of Bishops of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The United Methodist Church and the ELCA have

voted to be in full communion with each other. That means we recognize our doctrines and polity to be similar enough to permit a United Methodist minister to pastor an ELCA church and *vice versa*, should circumstances necessitate it. The connection, being the body of Christ, goes far beyond just our denomination.

There was a mission parade, wherein so many churches visually shared what they are doing as the body of Christ to touch others in their communities and in the world. This year we elected delegates to the General Conference and to the Western Jurisdictional Conference. Both of these are quadrennial events. The Jurisdictional Conference will elect new bishops to replace those retiring; the General Conference will process petitions from all the annual conferences. Any changes adopted will be reflected in our *Book of Discipline*, which provides guidance as to how we administer the church and live out being connected as the body of Christ.

Sunday morning was a special time of reading pastoral appointments. Each district superintendent came to the podium with the bishop. The superintendent read the name of the church and the bishop read the name of the pastor appointed there, and that pastor stood. When all appointed clergy in that district were standing, everyone else turned and laid hands on the standing pastors. Oh, did I mention that I stood as I was reappointed to serve as your pastor here in Carbondale for another year?

The Conference also received reports from several of the general boards of the Church, hearing about our missionary work around the world, assisting in relief efforts wherever needed, among others. And then final event of the conference, on Sunday afternoon, was the ordination of new clergy.

Our Bishop, Elaine Stanovsky, provided an eloquent opening address to the plenary session Thursday afternoon. I want to share with you something she said. She noted that in a recent study, those churches identified as being vital congregations all shared four traits: (1) strong pastoral leadership – my comment here is that strong lay leadership is equally important, which we have here in our church; (2) varied worship – this means different styles, different times, etc. We aren't big enough to do this – yet; (3) small groups – we have UMW, Sunday school classes, and an evening study class. There are many other small groups that will evolve as we grow; (4) missional involvement – we serve at the Extended Table once a month. We need expand our outreach involvement into other areas, and we will do so.

Bishop Elaine, as she likes to be called, added that the vital congregation study reflected that the first step for a congregation to become vital is to adopt goals for growth – spiritually as well as numerically. We are doing this now through our visioning process with the church council and open participation from you. To be a vital congregation is to be the body of Christ, connected beyond our own walls. We are moving toward that goal and beyond.

This United Methodist denomination of ours is vitally and dynamically involved around the world, ministering to millions. And it all begins right here, with you, sitting in the pew this morning. You are important. You are the body of Christ.

Paul expands on his theme of the body of Christ for the remainder of chapter 12 in 1 Corinthians. In verse 27 he says, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” So let's come full circle. How does one's individual faith affect others? Or, to say it another way, does your faith, what you believe, actually influence who you are as a person. Does it affect how you relate to other people and the actions you take on a daily basis? Does your faith reflect what you stand for in life? Can one person's faith really make a difference for the body of Christ?

Earlier this year, a book was published entitled *Branch Rickey*, written by Jimmy Breslin, a Pulitzer Prize winning sports reporter. The book chronicles the life of Branch Rickey, owner and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who is best known for bringing Jackie Robinson to the Dodgers in 1947, thereby breaking the color barrier in major league baseball. Many believe Rickey pushed for this breakthrough for the notoriety and novelty of it all. Such could not be further from the truth. Breslin records that Rickey had the idea to bring a black player into the major leagues for years and he pushed for it for only one reason – Rickey's faith told him it was the right thing to do.

Did I mention that Branch was Rickey's middle name? His first name was Wesley. He was christened Wesley Branch Rickey, having been named for Methodist founder John Wesley. Breslin writes, "Rickey is from the hills and swamps of southern Ohio, and was raised singing Methodist hymns in a wagon going to church on Sunday." Having been named Wesley, it figures Rickey grew up in a church-going Methodist family. It had a deeply formative effect on his life.

Breslin says that after purchasing the Brooklyn Dodgers, Wesley Branch Rickey immediately found a church in his new home. Breslin captures Rickey this way:

Rickey carries with him a Midwestern Christian religious fervor as strong as a wheat crop, and a political faith in anything Republican. Already he is a familiar figure at his new church in Queens, the Church in the Gardens.....It is a place of worship as lovely as it sounds.....On Sundays, Branch Rickey brought with him to church a prayer book and a background of Methodist studies from Ohio Wesleyan University, and sometimes he delivered the sermon. In one, he announced he was here to run the Brooklyn Dodgers and to serve the God to whom they prayed, and the Lord's work called him to bring the first black player into major league baseball.

The apostle Paul would applaud Wesley Branch Rickey for being a member of the body of Christ. By the way, did I mention that Jackie Robinson was also a staunch Methodist and a member of the body of Christ?

One person acting within the body can do incredible things for God and humanity. Several members acting as a unified congregation within the body of Christ can accomplish wondrous ministry for God. Who are we, really? Individually, we are United Methodists. Together we are the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church. We are an integral part of the body of Christ that encircles the globe, and as such we touch lives and we do work miracles! Thanks be to God! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 26 June 2011