

Uniting Words  
Rev. Todd Smith Lippert  
1 Corinthians 12: 12-31  
May 14, 2017

I'm getting ready to go on sabbatical, in fifteen days, but who's counting. As of May 1st, I've served at First UCC five years and that makes me eligible for a three month sabbatical. I'm grateful for this gift. My ultimate goal for my sabbatical is to come back rested and rejuvenated for the ministry that is ahead of us. I'm also excited to have some time to think about some questions that keep coming up here. Questions about the Bible, actually. Over the last few months I've had some conversations with First UCCers about the Bible, about passages and stories that are difficult, so difficult that they are a stumbling block to faith. I've left those conversations asking, "what are the Bible passages that are most helpful? Both for those of us who are deeply rooted in the progressive church and for those who are trying the church out again, or for the first time, wondering if Christianity has anything to offer. What are the Bible's Greatest Hits for us? The teachings and stories that we should know.

I've decided that I want to come up with what could be called First UCC's Essential Bible. That does suggest, though, that we would be able to agree on our central stories and teachings, so maybe I will just call it Pastor Todd's Essential Bible. I've also thought for a while that one of the purposes of the church is to be the curator of an ancient resource. We have resources in our tradition that can address the most vexing problems we are facing as a people right now, from poverty to race to climate change. I think it will be helpful for me, at least, to collect these Biblical resources and have them in one spot. This is something I'm quite excited to be thinking about while I'm on sabbatical. I'm excited to have some time for the Bible nerd in me.

Over the next few weeks, I'll be preaching through three of passages from the apostle Paul that will make my list of the Bible's greatest hits. These three all relate to Paul's quest for unity in the midst of diversity, Paul's efforts to deal with conflict in the church. Paul's approach to conflict may be helpful for us. We have divisions in our families, in our churches, and division fatigue is settling in our country too. I'm traveling next week to celebrate my mother's birthday, and all the extended family is coming in. I'm excited to see family I haven't seen since Sara and I were married, and I'm apprehensive too. My beautiful family is deeply divided about politics and, of course, religion too, which gets political pretty fast. My mom said to her brother, "you are welcome to come to church with me on Sunday to see what a liberal church is like. But you need to know, four of our six pastors are female. My uncle paused and said he would like to go to church with his sister.

I hear clergy talking with one another about how to hold divided churches together. The current political environment has been very difficult for churches and we have been feeling that tension at First UCC too. We want the church to be one place where we can live together despite our divisions. When this hope is threatened or breaks down, we feel like we are failing at something central to what we believe the church should be. We are caught in a little trap

though, because The Bible has a lot to say about our political life, about how we live together. When conflict surfaces, which is inevitable, there's also no doubt that we have difficulty communicating with one another in healing ways. I was at a Conference Board Meeting, hearing a report about two UCC Global Ministries personnel from Fergus Falls who have been out of the country for four years and they said, "everyone's so much angrier now." Another person said to me this week, "where are the uniting voices in our country right now? How do we speak to each other in uniting ways?" Paul is one of those uniting voices. Paul will help us honor one another and treat one another with respect, but he will also go to the heart of the conflict and take a side. Both of those things are happening in today's passage.

Our focus for today is Paul's statement that as a church we are one body with many members." Paul affirms the place of the individual within a community, affirms diverse perspectives within a community, but within a metaphor that assumes that the individuals are always focused on the good of the whole, never out for their own good alone.

Paul's theology isn't always the easiest for me, but I like Paul. Paul starts things, he's innovative, entrepreneurial. Paul runs around with his hair on fire starting churches throughout the Roman empire, creating alternative communities with a Jesus ethic. However, like many entrepreneurial personalities, Paul isn't good at maintaining the communities he starts. As soon as a church is up and running, he's off, going on to the next one, and then conflict blooms like the dandelions on my lawn.

The First letter to the Corinthians is Paul's response to this scenario in the church in Corinth. Paul started that church, left and then received word from Chloe's people, that the church was divided. Some were loyal to Paul, some were loyal to another apostle Apollos, some were loyal to Peter, some were saying, "hey isn't Jesus most important?" And there were other challenges too. This early church community was diverse in ethnicity, gender, and class: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female.

There are even more ingredients to this conflict: There are a few people in the church community who have a high opinion of themselves. Nobody likes boasting, but this boasting is related to money. Those with wealth and status are looking down their noses at others in the community, like the slaves. And, at table fellowship, those with wealth and status, who have plenty, aren't sharing their food and are allowing the poorest in the church to go hungry.

To these divisions, Paul crafts a response that has become the central metaphor for church life, and this approach is a resource wherever people are in community: in churches, in cities, as nations, as people of the world.

"Just as the body is one and has many members, so it is with Christ." Paul launches into that great conversation of the body parts - eyes, ears, noses, fingernails, every member matters. Every member has a gift to contribute. Every member has a gift that is needed for the functioning of the whole. This is a perspective we should take with us everywhere. We should

take it with us into our conflict, into our families, into our social circles, into the lens through which we see the world, “everyone has a place in the body, and everyone is gifted and has a gift to offer for the good of the whole.” This is the starting point for the church. Simply honoring one another will help us with our conflict. Honoring one another will lay the foundation for the healing our divisions.

Paul, though, doesn’t stop there. This is important for us to notice. Paul lays this foundation of respect for everyone in the community, so that he can confront behavior that is harmful. Whenever there is confrontation, someone is going to be upset. The anxiety of everyone is probably going to go up. But sometimes that confrontation is necessary for the health of a community, and Paul thinks it is time.

Paul says, “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.”

In these sentences, Paul is speaking directly to the wealthiest and most powerful members of the church community in Corinth. Paul is speaking to the ones who are looking down their noses at the slaves. Paul is speaking to the people who have plenty of bread, but aren’t sharing their bread with those who are going hungry.

In these sentences, Paul takes a side. He sides with the powerless. Paul stands in the tradition of the Exodus story, where God takes the side of the Hebrew slaves against the empire of Egypt. Paul stands in the tradition of Jesus who dines with tax collectors and sinners, common fisherman and the wealthy too, but confronts the authorities on behalf of the powerless.

Paul chooses the metaphor of the body carefully. Individual members of the body are always gifted and important, but they are always to be serving the good of the whole for there to be true unity. When individuals, and powerful individuals especially, are focused only on themselves, Paul comes in with a correction.

I hang out at little league baseball fields this time of year and help out. This week I saw a situation I see every year. There was a boy who was refusing to play catch with another, a boy whose skills aren’t quite as strong. But this year, I saw the coaches step in and say, “we’re a team. We all belong. We respect one another and we all play catch with each other, no exceptions. And the team took a step toward health.

As a church, we are one voice in the broader human community. Paul encourages us to honor one another in all things, but also to take a turn towards the less powerful, to speak when we see actions that are harming the less powerful in the community. As the church acts in this way, as our church seeks to do justice and engages the political arena, hopefully we do so while

honoring one another and staying deeply rooted to the deepest of themes in our Biblical tradition. Amen.