

“Be a Part of It”

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; I Corinthians 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 27, 2019, dedicated to Joe Baszynski, our 2018 moderator, to the all the lay leaders who served our congregation in 2018, all those who are stepping forward in leadership in 2019, to all the staff who serve our church every single day and especially to Marty Worth who retires this week from 14¾ years of love and service to our church and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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As we come together on this Congregational Meeting Sunday, it is one of the few times each year the Body of Christ at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio comes together as one body to worship, meet and break bread together in fellowship. On this glorious day of our 167th Annual Congregational Meeting, we have been given three great texts from Nehemiah 8, I Corinthians 12 and Luke 4.

In Nehemiah 8, Ezra gathers all the people together for their annual congregational prayer meeting (as interpreted from the Hebrew by Tim). Their high priest reads from the Torah and the people are so moved deeply by the hearing of God's word that they weep as they listen. He implores them to stop their crying and go forth to care for those who have nothing. As they go, they are called to acknowledge the joy of the Lord as their strength. In others, they "entered to worship and they are called to depart to serve" – just as we know to do.

Luke 4:14-21 is Jesus' announcement of his public ministry. I call it his "coming out party" as he reads the words of the prophet Isaiah 61:1-2. He opens the scroll and reads with the power of God's spirit breathing through him. Here is the text, according to **The Message**:

God has chosen me

*to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and*

*Recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
And to announce, "This is God's year to act!"*

This is powerful stuff. Jesus is staking his claim as he announces his intention to fulfill God's justice and peace for the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, the burdened, the battered and those in need of God acting in history NOW! He rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, sits down and as everyone is silent and watching him, he concludes, *"You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."*

This is truly a throw down the mike moment in Jesus' prophetic ministry. **Boom!**

In the midst of Ezra and Jesus' powerful call to worship and serve, we have Paul calling us to be something different for this world in need. Paul calls us all **to be together as one body** - acting as one people – in the spirit and name of Jesus Christ. It is not easy to be one body. If you don't believe me, talk to your own body. On any given day, any single body seeking to work together as a complete being has its challenges. Does your body

always have it together? Do all your body parts interact and function together as a singular unit?

When I think of the challenges our often bodies face, I think of hospitals – the places where we go when we have extraordinary needs for care. Let me reflect on this a moment – why hospitals matter so much to us as the body of Christ.

I spend a lot of time in hospitals. I have made many visits to many people in many rooms over many years with many conversations about many body parts and multiple bodily functions. Most of the time, the conversations concern bodily dysfunctions or the lack of body parts and organs working together for the health and wellbeing of the person with whom I am visiting. Something is wrong with the way blood is flowing, air is moving, limbs are functioning and parts are working together. Perhaps cancer cells have taken hold of organs where healthy cells once held sway. One part, or more than one part, is not working together for the health and wellbeing of the entire body.

Whenever any of us are drawn to hospitals to care for our bodies and the bodies of those whom we love we find ourselves drawn into healing hope. While most of the time real medical concerns weigh on our hearts and minds, we also feel a deep yearning for the presence of God, the presence of a power

beyond ourselves to turn to prayer, stillness and simply lifting up to God the healing of the person. In hospitals, we truly experience a blend of love, medicine and miracles working together for good. While medicine and miracles do not always deliver us, love never fails us – as the Apostle Paul points out in I Corinthians 13.

Hospitals are the places where we encounter our deepest needs for healing in our quest for wellness. Did you know that “hospitals” have their roots in Christian faith? The word “*hospital*” comes from the Latin word *hospitalia*, which means “*an apartment for strangers and guests.*” The practice of hospitality was enjoined as a central virtue in early Christianity. By the third century AD, *hospitalia* was the place where strangers and pilgrims were received and cared for. At that time, it was more a place of hospitality than of medical treatment as early Christians from across the world made pilgrimages to the holy places of the Middle East. Many of these pilgrims travelled without money, believing that they would receive assistance and care on their way from other accommodating Christians. Many “hospitals” were established, particularly in remote and dangerous places to extend, as tangible gifts in the spirit of Jesus Christ, care for those in need. In fact, many of the world’s great hospitals can be traced to the period directly following the Council of Nicaea in 325

A.D., when the bishops of the Church were instructed to go out into every cathedral city in Christendom and start a hospital. As time went by, medical treatment gradually played a bigger and bigger role in hospitals. From the 16th century onwards, hospitals began to take on the modern meaning as we know it today.

Hospitality and care play such a large part in who we are as Christ's body. First, we take care of our own. That is how we were designed by God in Christ to be. As Paul tells us – each of us is part of the body of Christ. Each of us has a part to play in keeping the body healthy and helping the body to grow. The more we work together and do our part, the more efficient and effective we are. If we are jealous of each other, or covet the other's part, our body fails. If we lift up and support one another with encouragement and praise, our body succeeds. If we are critical and unthankful, our body fails. If we are supportive and thankful for the other's great accomplishments and hard work, our body succeeds.

As Paul puts it in I Corinthians 12:15-18:

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 God wanted it.

What a blessing our entire body is. What a blessing each part plays to support the other parts. We come to realize some important truths in Paul's wonderful Body of Christ Parts Party.

There are three takeaways with which I leave you from Paul's amazing teaching on the Body of Christ:

First, we need each other. We cannot become so engrossed in the little section of work that we do, that we lose touch with the other organs, limbs and functions of our body. Each part is important. From holding babies to washing dishes; from cooking and serving meals to cleaning them up and putting everything away; from talking to hugging; from creating bulletins to handing them out; from choral mastery to lip-synching and silent absorbing of four-part harmonies; from organ playing to bell ringing; from hanging banners to hanging the greens; from contributing money to counting it; from our welcomes to our farewells; from social justice to social graces; from smiles to more smiles; from Good Sam to Deep Griha; from volunteers in the office to volunteers in every other

department of our life together; from church council to church worship. **We need each other.**

Second, we need to respect each other, too. As I have been eluding to this truth: “All service ranks the same with God.” In the body of Christ, there is body part that is more important than another one. Paul’s anatomy lesson teaches us this.

Whenever one of us thinks we are better than another or more important than another member of the body, we all come out of this dismembered. It hurts us all when one takes on that attitude over another. We get things done – together. That is how we do it!

Third, we ought to sympathize with each other. Just before Christmas, I was in the humble home of one of our oldest members – Betty Cobb. She has a heart of gold and at 93 years old still hand-knits baby blankets for newborns at Nationwide Children’s Hospital. As we visited, all she wanted to talk about was the babies who were in her heart every day. I was blown away by this gentle member of the body of Christ. She has a genuine heart for others which inspires me every day. She shines God’s love and light in a special way. She loves everyone and does it with a kindness and clearness that humbles me. She is my teacher in the ways of humility, kindness and sympathy. She reaches out to the littlest and the most vulnerable and gives

and gives and gives. She is a part of the body of Christ who moves me deeply in her sympathy and clear loving ways.

I see God's "sympathetic way" in so many of you. You move me deeply. Thank you. In our *hospitalia* – "*our little apartment for strangers and guests*" that we call First Church, God's spirit is moving. Look around. You are miracles, connected body parts with energetic synapses just waiting to fire up and connect and engage one another. Your love is everywhere present.

We are so blessed. Can you see it?

In this year now opening before us, please join me to more fully **ENGAGE** your brothers and sisters in the body of Christ at First Church. We need to connect our body parts in new and meaningful ways. Small groups, dinner fellowship, new couples' retreats, moms and dads and kids getting together for fun, Millennial madness, age driven fun (like escape rooms or pubs with a purpose). I will help you connect. Think about what you are really good at - an idea for fellowship and study that you could start. I will help you connect. Perhaps you have a way to care for those who are most vulnerable – like the babies, or refugees, or immigrants, or elderly, single people who are alone, or homeless men, women and children among us. I will help you connect. Perhaps you have a program, a

film, a mission, a calling - to reach out, to build, to create, to recreate, to study. I will help you connect.

By year's end, it is my hope and prayer that every person listed on our membership rolls, every member of the body of Christ at First Church is somehow connected to other members in at least one new and meaningful way. This is ambitious. But, together as the body of Christ, we can do this! I believe in us!

We are the body of Christ. All it takes is for you to be a part of it. What is part? Name it. Claim it. Own it. Share it. Engage it.

Be a part of it. Amen.

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