

St. Paul's Congregational Church
February 3, 2019: Epiphany3C
1 Cor. 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Once upon a time a group of people in Sarasota, Florida, held a ground breaking ceremony for their new church building at the First Brethren Church. Instead of using the usual special shovel with one person turning over the first piece of dirt, they brought along an old plough – the kind our forebears used to break the first sod on the prairie. First, they hitched the minister to the plough. Of course, he couldn't budge it at all – not one inch.

Then they hitched the church secretary, the music director, and the sexton onto the plough. They couldn't move it either.

So they tied a long rope to the plough and added the members of the church council. Still the plough wouldn't budge.

“All right,” somebody yelled. “Everybody grab hold and pull.”

So the whole congregation, women, men, and children – everyone pulled on that rope. And the plough sliced through the ground to start the new church.

We're working on building a new church too, aren't we. All of our commissions are looking at their areas of responsibilities – coming up with new programs, finding ways to help our congregation become engaged in our ministry here in Nutley and beyond. We're looking for volunteers to take hold of the rope, if you will, to share leadership and to welcome others on the journey. Our Church Council is working hard to try to find a way to get us stable financially – this year in connection with our 125th Anniversary celebration, we're looking at both fund-raisers and fun-raisers in our community. It's a challenging time for this congregation – we are indeed looking at building a new church with fewer resources, with lots of changes, both here and in the world in general.

Through all of this activity, we have been preparing for our Annual Meeting in March: writing reports, coming up with a budget for 2019 - this meeting is our opportunity to review our ministry for the past year, to ask questions, to express our opinions as we look ahead to the future – a new future for us this year especially. But we gather to express our commitment to our life together as the Body of Christ – we gather to begin building and

re-building a new church. Of course, building and rebuilding goes on every day, every week, all the time, but at this time of year we seem to really focus on that. Maybe that can be one of our goals: to realize that rebuilding is an ongoing process – strengthening the Body of Christ is an ongoing process – bringing in the realm of Christ is an ongoing process.

But building a new church goes way far beyond the financial aspects – that’s an important, even critical aspect, but it’s not the only one. And our scripture readings today point us in that broader direction; they point us and remind us of the One who is indeed in charge.

There’s a shared theme: the Spirit is active and present in the world. Jesus, reading the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, chooses a passage that speaks of the one who is spirit blessed, the anointed one, the chosen one. I wonder as Jesus announces the fulfillment of the scripture to the congregation, if he’s not just talking about himself as that fulfillment, though we know he clearly is. What if he’s also speaking about the whole people of God? Those who are anointed and chosen are also “the people”, those who were at that synagogue then, and us right here and now! The people who together are being called to repair what has been broken, and to bring freedom to the enslaved.

Paul is speaking to a young, struggling church in Corinth – telling them of the Spirit in action, inspiring the shared mission of the church to build, with its God given talents, the realm of God. He stresses again and again that the whole church is essential to do this work – no one part, no one gift – is enough to meet the goal. We engage in ministry only in the company of the faithful, only with and through others. By our alienation or apathy, we weaken the whole. By our fruitfulness and connectedness, we build up the whole. Without each of our individual contributions to the life of the church, the whole body does suffer.

Church is and has always been countercultural. How do we teach our children and ourselves to function as a dependent body, the Body of Christ? In a society that values individualism, how do we work smoothly with one another? In a society that teaches us to stake out our small patch of personal space and defend it, how do we claim our identity as part of an interrelated and sustaining community? How do we live out an interdependence, bound together in covenant with God and each other?

Paul speaks of who we are in Christ. We are no longer separate souls, carrying our burdens alone; we are in covenant with each other, entrusted with a common witness. Because a congregation is not 30, or 100, or 200, or 400 individuals who happen to gather in the same place at the same time on a Sunday morning. A congregation is what is created when

those 30 or 100 or 200 or 400 individuals come together intentionally to rest in one another's faith, to hear one another's message, to answer one another's questions, to teach one another's children, to pray with and for one another, to trust one another's judgment, to rely on one another's gifts, and to love one another with the love of Christ.

Any congregation that is truly a part of the Body of Christ is a Spirit-filled, anointed community. It is a place where the community actively seeks God's guidance and God's presence. It is a place where the gifts of God given to each are used to bless the whole people of God. It is a place of shared suffering. It is a place of shared rejoicing. It is not a place of 30 or 100 or 200 or 400 patches of personal space, territory. It is not a place of invulnerability but a place of being vulnerable, recognizing that we do need each other. A congregation that is truly part of the body of Christ is a community of justice, mercy, humility and equity. It is a community with a mission, a ministry that goes far beyond the walls of the place.

Isn't this a wonderful, though challenging, charge for us as we gather to do the business of the congregation! To remember this, to honor the gifts we all bring, no matter how big or small. To focus on our mission to be a community of justice, mercy, humility, and equity.

And none of us can do that alone. The words of Isaiah that Jesus quotes speak of that mission – the mission to heal what has been broken and to rebuild what has been lost. Jesus, as our head, calls the whole body to that mission. Jesus, as our head, calls each of us by name to be part of that whole body in mission. It's not a mission for individuals – but it's the mission of a community committed to being a nurturing environment in which healing, teaching, praying, prophesying, and preaching are the focused intention of every person. No one person can do it all. Even Jesus didn't do it all himself! He called his disciples, us, to form a community in which there would be consistent, on-going, interdependent ministry.

Interdependent. To be a Christian community, to be a congregation, to be the body of Christ means to be interdependent. We are not called to sit with our hands folded, unhappy with what is going on, complaining – waiting for God or somebody else to assume responsibility. No – interdependence is enabling in the best sense of the word – it's healthy – it involves relying on each part, each and every person no matter who, to use his or her talent, skill, gifts to the fullest. We are all responsible, aren't we!

We are all responsible to use our God given gifts = whether gifts of time, talents or treasure. We're all called to be responsible and accountable to each other to take our place, wherever, whatever that may be.

That feels so liberating, so freeing to me – how about you? We have each other in the Body of Christ – we don't have to do it alone. We can't do it alone. We are all in this together. Every one of us has a gift, a skill, a talent that's important and vital to the life of this congregation, this Body. Isn't that good news as we all take hold of the rope and create and re-create our church?

What gifts do each of us have that we need to share? That we haven't yet shared? How do we call forth the gifts of those not here in worship today but who are part of the Body just as you and I are. This community has such an abundance – imagine if we all contributed to the health of the body! And it occurs to me that means, if treasure is tight, how will we use our gifts of time and talents to further God's mission, our ministry at this time and place? Let's work on that together – let's be interdependent in the best sense of the word.

As a Christian community, we need to trust one another to work cooperatively to create a healthy body so we can all eventually take our place as a whole and healthy body working together to bring the realm to life here and now. That's exciting.

Something else that's important: we are not individuals defined as a group only by the walls of this building on Sunday. That's sometimes so hard to remember and put into action, isn't it. This Body of Christ, gathered on Sunday and scattered during the week, is still the Body. We come here on Sundays to feed and to be fed, to be nurture and to be nurtured, to be challenged to live out our faith every day, sometimes in most difficult situations. I remember my banking days when sometimes the message of Sunday was blurred as soon as I walked into the office on Monday mornings – sometimes happens right here too. And that's the challenge for all of us. Oh yes, the church is countercultural and isn't that a good thing. A beacon of light in a sometimes so dark world of work and worry. Jesus never said that living in the light would always be easy – what Jesus said was that we'd never be alone in our living and loving. We are commissioned and anointed to be a congregation which from Monday to Saturday carries these walls outward into our schools, companies, offices, towns, homes, making of each person we meet a potential partner in our mission – that's different from making members of our community, isn't it. A partner – sharing the mission to which we are called by God. Everyone has gifts and talents needed in the body of Christ – everyone. So let's work together to call these gifts and talents forth as we work to build and rebuild our church.

We have been called to our task by our teacher, to the task of loving God, loving our neighbor, to the task of bringing in the realm of God. And

we have been given friends and colleagues whose gifts, combined with ours, will enable us to accomplish that task. That's exciting. We have been told by Jesus that the time is now for the fulfillment of the Scriptures – so let's grab onto that rope of the spirit and pull together, committed and determined. With God all things are possible – and we won't have to do it alone. God is still speaking to you, to me: there's nothing the Body of Christ can't do – let's do it together! Amen.

Let us pray:

Creator God, you have called us to be one body, responsible for each other. You have called us into covenant with each other and with you and entrusted us with one another's well being. You invite us to nurture each other, to trust each other, to empower each other, to unbind each other, so that together we will be a strong and healthy body. Creator God, grant that we may be worthy members of your incarnate presence, your body, in the world. In Jesus' name, Amen