

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, January 24, 2016)

Text:

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a (NRSV)

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 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." On the contrary, 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. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Together We Are Different"**

As the sole pastor of a small congregation, I am often reminded of how vital it is to support all of the parts of this body as we can see and feel so acutely the loss of even one person's gifts and the ways we often must hobble through when one part of our body is missing or out of commission. I would also like to remind YOU that even though it is tempting to see your pastor as the head of this body, you should always consider that a head is pretty useless on its own without the rest of the body's parts, unless, perhaps, you're Dr. Stephen Hawking, and I think we can all agree you don't have a Dr. Stephen Hawking head here in front of you!

Just this week, I awoke more than once realizing how many ways I wasn't meeting your needs and wondering how in the world I could do a better job serving and letting each of you know how much I care for you and want to be there for you as you go through all the challenges and vicissitudes of your lives. Thankfully, as I was

lamenting God chimed in loudly, “they don’t necessarily want you to be, my friend. Be who I called you to be and let me take care of the rest.” Whew. Thanks.

In our opening hymn this morning, “God of Change and Glory” by Al Carmines, we sang the phrase, “In our difference is blessing..” and it got me to thinking about why I am part of the United Church of Christ and why I think you may be, too. Although there is never only one reason for being part of a denomination or a local church, I think the idea that “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey you are welcome here” is fundamental to who we are here and to the United Church of Christ as a whole. Sometimes, in fact, I wonder if we shouldn’t say, “BECAUSE of who you are, as a unique child of God with you own unique set of gifts you are most welcome here,” but, admittedly, it doesn’t roll off the tongue as well.

Growing up, and especially in our teenage years (those of you who are there right now can confirm if this is still the case for me), one of our primary drives was to “fit in” with those around us and not “stick out” due to our difference. As we grew, however, most, if not all of us realized that it is what makes us different from others and how we stand out from the crowd that is of most value to us. Accepting the unique gifts that God has presented to us, and celebrating the unique gifts of others around us, we realize the beauty and diversity of God’s kin-dom and the strength and growth that comes from living in a diverse community.

“...Diversity within the church is not a problem to be avoided, solved, or managed, but a gift of God’s grace and a sign of the Spirit at work,” writes Brian Peterson, a professor New Testament at Luther Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. “The differing gifts of the Spirit form us in such a way that we do, and indeed must, belong to one another.”

Robert Stuhlman, in his article, “Doesn’t seem we get anywhere without walking in each other’s shoes” recalls the brilliant youth worker who illustrated the strength of a diverse community made stronger through coming together by taking a string of soft yarn; a single strand of soft wool, and showed how easily it could be broken by a teenager’s finger passing through it. However, when the yarn was wound around the hands into a strand of more than ten it was virtually unbreakable. And think of how even more impervious it would be using ten strands of different kinds of wool strung together.

Along with Paul’s wise insights into the heart of Christian (and other) community, Stuhlman notes that he’ also “always liked Benjamin Franklin’s remarks to the assembled delegates in Philadelphia at the beginning of the American Revolution: “Either we hang together or assuredly we shall hang separately.”

I wonder what it is that draws you to this community and makes you want to hang together here. Do you feel that your unique gifts are celebrated? Do you find acceptance in what you have to bring here? I certainly hope so. Of course, some of

that is up to you. Part of being within a community is making sure that you step up with the gifts you have and let it be known that you are willing to use them. Too often I think we sit around wondering why somebody isn't noticing what we have to give, unaware of the fact that maybe they don't know what are gifts are or have so much on their own plate that they need some help seeing how you could help! Let us celebrate the uniqueness of you by coming forward with what you have to offer just like so many of you have.

Just as in my annual report I wrote this week, I hesitate to start listing people and their gifts knowing that I'll inevitably leave somebody out, but just as illustration, I'm thinking of our dear KD Henderson, now living in Cambria who came forward with her extraordinary ability to create beauty using the simplest of materials. Take a look at her "Crossway" creation, which you can see out the big picture window to you right as you come in the front doors. It's a great example of how one person's unique gifts can continue to speak through the years. Even within the creation you can get a sense of how the many different types of stones she used to create it form a more powerful whole through the beauty of their unique shades and shapes.

The strength and beauty of diversity is obviously so pleasing to God who created so many differences and variations within nature. I'm always blown away when I see one of those nature documentaries that show how many forms of life there are on our planet. I'm especially intrigued by the staggering variety of marine life that exists. Discovery tells us that, "according to a thorough new analysis, between 700,000 and one million species live in the world's oceans...which also estimated that between one-third and two-thirds of those species have yet to be named and described." Well, by us anyway. I'm sure God has a name for each and every one!

How strong, how vibrant how exciting to think of the vast number of life forms not only on our planet but also within the universe. Obviously, our Creator is thrilled with difference and invites us to accept the beauty and strength of difference within our realm as well. It's another great way we've been given to keep growing, to keep asking, to keep challenging ourselves and others to see that there is still so much to come and so much to be gained as God's kin-dom unfolds like a beautiful sea anemone!

I have to agree with Professor Peterson when he asserts that, "we find ourselves called to recognize that diversity helps us to keep asking what God's will actually is, rather than trapping ourselves in the same old assumptions. Holy diversity" he writes, "is an important remedy for our tendency toward complacency."

You see, it's not just in the acceptance of our differences that we grow more beautifully together in community, but it is in the celebration of our differences that we actually pull ourselves out of the traps of self-satisfaction and self-righteousness as we see in others that which we do not possess ourselves and allow each others gifts to

flourish in conjunction with each other to create a body that recognizes the importance of each of its different parts to keep it running and healthy.

What gifts will you offer this year from your multi-talented self to build up Christ's body not only in this church but in all of God's kingdom? Be on the lookout for ways you can participate; be open to the gifts others see in you and help others to see the gifts in themselves. And let the phrase, "Hey, I need a kidney over here!" guide you in the days ahead.

How's that for a transition? Today, we have a true object lesson to help us know what it is to be part of a body and how vital each part of the body is. As many of you know, our amazing Cynthia Maldonado has been seeking a kidney for a very long time. In fact, it will be four years in July. Being way down on the list to receive a kidney, she has endured many health challenges over the last years and has to sit through dialysis for four hours at a time, three times each week.

Now, if you know Cynthia, you know that this is a big step she's taking to put this out here and let us know she'd like help in finding a new kidney. But with the help of Susan Jakubowski who wanted to donate her own kidney but was not eligible due to a number of reasons, Cynthia is going bold with her request and I know we all want to partner with her. Yes?

In the weeks ahead we will be putting out information on what it means to donate a kidney and how you go about it step-by-step. As Susan has been through it already, she's a great resource and is even willing to drive anybody to get their tissue tested who wants to go through the process.

The very first step is to know your blood type. Cynthia is A positive and which means her donor needs to have an A or O blood type.

We won't inundate you with anymore information today, but, as I said, there will be more to come and we hope that you will share it with your friends and family and post it on Facebook, etc., etc. Together as a family, I know we can help bring in one of the necessary part of the body for our beloved Cynthia. Please feel free to be in contact with me or Susan or Cynthia if you want more information before the Spire article comes out next week.

No matter what your gift or how you're able to help, you are a part of the body and necessary to it. Some of us won't be able to give a kidney or find somebody who will, but there are so many ways you can be a part of the support and healing of all of Christ's children as we go forward.

Let me leave you today with this great little bit I found on the Ekklesia Project by writer BRIAN VOLCK.

“Last year, while visiting our dear friends, Sandie and Owen, and enjoying an evening of good food and even better conversation,” Brian writes, “Jill, my wife, said...“When I look at what other people accomplish, I can’t help thinking about all those other things I should be doing: working to stop the death penalty, saving starving children, reading the best books, having informed opinions.”

Sandie paused a moment to ponder Jill’s concerns, and said, “All those things are important, but we’re all part of the body of Christ, and we have a role, however small. So what if you’re the nose hair? You’re there for a purpose. You may not have any idea what good you’re doing, but that’s still your job: to be a nose hair in the body of Christ.”

Amen? Amen!