

WE ARE...THE BODY OF CHRIST

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

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Some people think that Christianity is about a set of beliefs. For many centuries, most people thought this – that the one factor which determined whether or not you were considered a Christian is you holding all of the right beliefs. There are many Christians throughout the world today, including in our country, who still believe this. Battles have been fought over belief systems, sometimes literal life and death battles. Churches still divide over questions of belief – who can be a member? What do you believe about the virgin birth? Do you have to believe the resurrection literally happened? Who can be an ordained minister? Who's eligible to receive communion? Who can get married in the church? Do you have the right beliefs?

But renowned church historian Diana Butler Bass has been studying the church in its first five centuries and she has concluded that in that time, people understood Christianity primarily as a way of life, not a system of doctrines. The earliest Christians were not called “believers” but were called “followers”. They focused on enacting Jesus’ teachings, and those teachings served as a practical spiritual pathway that improved the lives of those who followed.

One of the earliest Christian teachers and writers, a man named Justin Martyr, wrote this in the second century: “Christian practice mends lives.” He went on to say, “This is how our lives changed once we started following Jesus – instead of focusing on acquiring wealth and possessions, we now share everything we have. Instead of hating people who are different from us, we now pray for our enemies...” This new religion

transformed people. It gave even women, peasants and slaves an ability to create meaningful lives.

I'm fascinated and captivated by these accounts of the early church. Isn't it striking how contemporary these words sound? As if they were written for us today...how many people do you know whose lives are diminished because they think of nothing except the acquisition of wealth and possessions...they find that that search for things leaves them feeling empty. How many of the problems in our world today are caused by the compulsion to hate and destroy people who are different from us?

Listen again to these four words of gospel good news from the 2nd century: "Christian practice mends lives." I think about the lives that I'm aware of that need mending...the stories I listened to over the past year, the conversations we've had in staff meetings and at Church Council and with Stephen Ministers...lives affected by opiate use and other addictions, men and women of all ages and all life circumstances living with anxiety and depression, lives spinning out of control because of the busy-ness of modern suburban family life, lives that have lost their center. Our lives need mending. Christian practice mends lives.

Here at the Avon Lake United Church of Christ we are trying our best to live out our Christian faith in our daily lives, encouraging one another to walk in the ways of Jesus, to practice our faith. Our focus for the year 2018 was on the word "compassion."

We talked about the cycle of compassion as Jesus describes it when he says, "Love one another as you love yourself." So we focused some last year on being compassionate with ourselves by becoming healthier. The Daniel Plan was a huge focus for 2018, resulting in improved wellness and many new friendships.

We practice compassion through two new small groups, each of which meets monthly: our caregivers support group and our mental health support group. An

awareness of the challenges of parenting today led to us creating a six-week Parenting class featuring experts on various topics, and we showed the documentary, "Screenagers."

The Mission Team expanded its outreach last year, adding Genesis House domestic violence shelter as a mission partner, and connecting in more personal ways with two sober living facilities in Lorain County. Many of us learned more about the opiate crisis by reading and discussing together the book, Dreamland.

I hope you'll read my annual report for my description of some of the other highlights of our 2018 Year of Compassion.

Our focus word for 2019 is Sabbath. If you think that an ALUCC Year of Sabbath means a slower year, a year of doing less, just take a look at our calendar. But we will be focusing on Sabbath as a spiritual practice. The first instance of Sabbath in the Bible is when God pauses after the sixth day of creation. Do you remember the rhythm of those six days? The story of creation is told this way. There are six days of creation. Each day God creates something magnificent, and at the end of each day God looks around at what has been created, God takes a deep breath and says, "It's good." And then after the six days, God looks at everything that has been created and takes a long holy breath and says, "It's good." That seventh day, God stops and rests. God uses the seventh day to look around and reflect, to take it all in, with gratitude.

How often do you stop? How often do you stop in your tracks, and look around at what you're doing? Parents, do you ever stop for a moment and look at the children you're raising and say, "This is good work. These are good children." Not that your work is done, not that your parenting is perfect, but do you ever stop and reflect with gratitude? Do you ever stop long enough to reflect on your life? When's the last time you took the time to reflect on what's going well, and what you'd like to change? How would your life be different if you paused long enough to breathe in the spirit of God? Could you turn off all of

the devices that distract you, and try to quiet the voices in your head and practice trying to hear what God might be saying to you?

These are Sabbath practices. We're going to be talking about them throughout this year. You'll hear about Sabbath in sermons. We'll share books and articles. And, as a church, we are going to engage in a time of intentional reflection. We are setting up opportunities for small groups to gather in homes and here at church for what we're calling "2020 Vision Sessions". In these sessions we will take the time to look around at what God is doing in our midst and give thanks for it...we'll give thanks for mission trips and meaningful worship experiences, for our multigenerational congregation, our Thrift Shop, and our beautiful building and grounds – and then we'll listen together for what God is calling us to do in the next five to ten years. By this time next year, the year 2020, our goal is to present to the congregation a long-range plan for mission and ministry, along with a plan for how our facility can best accommodate that programming. That 2020 Vision will lead us right into the year 2021 and a celebration of our 125th anniversary.

I hope that you will watch for ways you can participate in these 2020 Vision Sessions, for truly everyone's input is wanted.

A sad but necessary component of our present and future efforts is our desire to make sure our church is as safe as possible. The work of the Safety Team will continue this year and will be a part of all of our long-range planning.

Our scripture passage for today comes also from the early years of the church. Paul is addressing the church at Corinth, a church that was easily swayed by messages it was receiving from other leaders. Paul wants to strengthen this church from the inside out. It starts, he says, with how you treat each other. The church can't be an effective witness in the world if it is chaotic and fractured. When people outside the church look at us and see nothing but polarization and dysfunction, we don't look any different than the rest of

the culture. If we are to lead others toward the way of Jesus, we need to look like people others would want to be in community with. That doesn't mean being holier-than-thou. But it does mean living in such a way that people see in us a quality of life characterized by love. In the early church, those outside the church were drawn in by looking at the community and saying of them, 'Look how they love one another.'

As he was preparing for the men's prayer group last Monday, Wayne Eastman read this passage and reminded me of the South African concept known as Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a word that is translated into this phrase: "I am because you are." It points to the interconnectedness of all humanity. It's what Paul means by the image, "one body." We are as connected to one another as our own individual body parts are to each other. Not only that, but each part of the body is valued and indispensable. Here's how Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu of South Africa puts it: "A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."

We are the body of Christ. We are a body of Christ that enjoys this life together, that has plenty of opportunities every year for laughter and just having fun. We are people who throw cornhole bags and wash dogs, who stick our faces in chocolate pudding for pie-eating contests and proudly hold up our chili trophies. We are people whose Christmas pageant featured ninja angels. We are people of compassion, people of Sabbath. We are people who embrace the ancient insight that this faith is a spiritual pathway, a life built on transformative practices of love.

Thanks be to God that we are together in this place and time.