

"A Well-Oiled Machine?"

A meditation based on Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; and Luke 4:14-21

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Redlands United Church of Christ

Sharon R. Graff

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Many years ago, I dared to prepare a sermon entitled, "The Only Thing Constant is Change." That sermon was a stretch for me, as I prefer stability, constancy, and at my core, am a pretty boring person. It was, as they say in seminary, one of those sermons I was really preparing to preach to myself. The only thing constant is change... As it turned out, that Sunday morning our son ended up in the hospital, and while I was sitting in ICU with him, someone else preached my sermon. I still smile at the irony...

Today's biblical passages stretch me in a similar manner. I prefer neat and tidy. The body, according to the Apostle Paul, is not. I prefer organized, scheduled, routine. The work we have been given to do, according to Jesus, is anything but! I prefer to look at the wonders of nature from a safe distance, preferably while warm and dry. Even though I hear the psalmist's words that it is through the seasons and cycles of the earth and sky that God's laws are taught to us, this last week of snow and rain has not been my preferred teacher. Yes, these three biblical passages we've heard today stretch me, and perhaps they do you as well.

When we meet Jesus this morning, he has returned home. "Small town" hardly begins to describe Nazareth. The entire village was about as large as a medium-sized United Church of Christ congregation, somewhere between 200 and 400 villagers. The setting in this scene may not have been an actual building at all, but a simple gathering of faithful Jewish people. The Rev. Kate Huey, who is on our UCC national staff, says in her sermon on this text that this

story from Luke "...describes for us the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when he was just getting started and then went back home to Nazareth for a visit, to the people who had watched him grow up and thought they knew him well. He had already gotten something of a reputation out there, where they didn't know him, and everyone who had heard him speak thought he was, well, sensational. So far, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus hasn't healed anyone, hasn't multiplied any loaves and fishes, hasn't cast out any demons, and hasn't brought anyone back from the dead. All he has done is teach in the out-of-town synagogues, and, according to Luke, 'a report about him spread through all the surrounding country' and he 'was praised by everyone...' And right here, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus lays out his game plan, his policy statement, his campaign slogans, if you will. This is what he's about – good news for the poor, release for the captives, freedom for the oppressed, and sight for the blind."

According to Marcus Borg, this sort of talk coming out of the mouth of Jesus came directly from the tradition of those who were listening to Jesus that day. Jesus is not saying anything they hadn't heard before. Those in Nazareth knew very well the prophet's message about embodied compassion and justice. Yet the commentary of Jesus, after the reading, must have clashed with what Borg calls the social world of Jesus. All around Jesus and his childhood friends, the culture was informed by the holiness code, which in turn stated clearly that the poor people, the blind people, the debtors, and a host of other folks just did not measure up to the purity that marked the insiders and that kept the outcasts, well, outside. That purity code kept things neat and tidy and orderly. Those on the inside were privileged and blessed by God. Those on the outside were not.

Returning to the 21st-century, we're not just studying history as we read this passage from Luke. Neither are we simply reviewing the biography of someone who lived a long time ago. As we read the gospel this morning, we are reading our own biography, our own

operating instructions, our Spirit-given GPS directions for our life. In contrast to the social world in which he lived, Jesus was about the politics of compassion, and so ought we to be. In his very first recorded sermon, Jesus outlined where that compassion would lead. It would lead to the slums, the prisons, the hospitals, and the death beds. The politics of compassion would lead him to anywhere that despair or loneliness or sadness reigned. He would be there, purity code be damned. Later in Luke's gospel, in chapter 6, verse 36, Jesus generalized this first sermon teaching into the pithy, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate..." Again, Marcus Borg assures us that this is the right translation of the verse, not "Be merciful," but "be compassionate."

If we, too, are being called to be compassionate, and I believe we are, then our road will take us into the center of the world's suffering... We will follow Jesus to places like Haiti when it is time, and, in the meantime, we will follow Jesus to places like the Redlands Methodist Church parking lot where homeless children and youth are being fed each week. If we are being called to be compassionate, and I believe we are, then we will follow Jesus to the bedside of our own dear Dorothy Landeros as she makes her passing. If we are being called to be compassionate, and I believe we are, then we will follow Jesus this year into our own church kitchen to prepare food for guests, and into our shepherd meetings to discuss important matters of faith and life, and into our church's classrooms to teach and learn, and into our choir loft and behind our bell tables to make joyful noises to God. If we are being called to be compassionate, and I believe we are, then we will follow Jesus to board rooms and on freeways, to stores and around dinner tables, and there, we will offer compassion, Jesus-style. And in that offering, that offering of compassion, we will change the world.

Marcus Borg says, in an age of excessive individualism, we would rather talk about "a thousand points of light," each one of us doing our thing to better the world, rather than the

idea of the community re-shaping itself one compassionate act at a time, re-ordering its priorities one compassionate decision at a time, changing the system and transforming our relationships within it one compassionate moment at a time; whatever it takes to meet the needs of God's children and to extend a compassionate response to the suffering of the world, that is our call. Mercy may suggest one person over another, but compassion – that means feeling with another, right alongside them. Not from above or from apart, but side by side.

This road of compassion, essential and compelling as it is, is neither neat nor tidy, nor even very well-organized. This is where the Apostle Paul's words to us today offer corrective humor, if not hope to accompany our work of compassion! As close as he gets to telling a joke, Paul paints a picture of a human body with renegade parts. A foot that complains it is not a hand, and leaves the body. An ear that bemoans it cannot see, and so leaves the body. An entire body, reminiscent of Cyclops, that is one enlarged eye, and consequently, cannot hear a thing. Another whole body, shaped like an oversized ear, that, surprisingly, has no way to smell the roses. Renegade turns argumentative, as the eye miraculously speaks to the hand, and the head speaks to the feet, saying, "we don't need you..." Out of this ridiculous analogy, Paul concludes, "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

According to Paul, our essence as the church is like the essence of the human body and its constituent parts. We are, none of us, well-oiled machines, nor is our congregation. We are more like organic, dynamic, connected body parts. One part needs the other to be fulfilled. No one part can separate from the body without hurting itself and the whole body. We preachers often think this passage in 1 Corinthians was written just for us, for as the shepherds of the flock, we tend to know the particulars of who is hurting, who is rejoicing, which part is functioning well, and which part isn't. Yet Paul says nothing about knowledge as a prerequisite

for this organic relationship within the body of Christ to be realized. He only writes that this is how we are to function...just as a human body functions together and thrives.

When Paul lists the various gifts—apostles, prophets, teachers, healing, assistance, leadership, miracle-workers, speaking and interpreting the Spirit's words—Paul is urging us, I believe, to see our congregation not as a well-oiled machine with each part playing its assigned role, but rather as a living organism with the multi-faceted work of compassion to accomplish. And I can assure you, friends, that such work is neither neat nor tidy, but it is fun and exciting, and, ironically, brings us closer to each other in the body as well as to God who smiles upon us all.

One contemporary theologian has written that we are not “many” like “many pebbles in a box,” but are organically related...together we form an ecology of rejoicing and suffering, of justice and compassion. If, in this year ahead, we could continue to come together, to be better together than any of us would be alone, we would find our lives enriched by simply recognizing and celebrating the many different ways God has made us human beings, full of beauty. If we could continue to share the tasks of ministry and of building up the body, recognizing the gifts that God has given each of us for different ministries without having our vision restricted by categories and presuppositions, we would discover a treasure trove of gifts waiting right here. If, at the end of the day or the conclusion of the task group or the completion of the job at hand, if we could stand back with gratitude for the body's many parts, then we would be led toward that “more excellent way” Paul promised when he wrote, “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” We know what is coming in the familiar passage that follows, the soaring, poetic passage on love. Perhaps that is, in the end, what we need even more than unity and diversity: we need love to be the mark by which we are known.

Once again we circle back to Jesus and his first sermon. Carol Lakey Hess refers to it as a kind of “plumb line of Jesus’ teaching.” A plumb line that we must use to measure our work... “The primary question,” she writes, “is not so much, what does God demand for righteousness? [The primary question] is, rather, who needs attention and compassion?” Today, one of my mentors-from-afar in ministry, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, has the final word. Coffin famously wrote, “The lack of material well-being among the poor reflects a lack of spiritual well-being among the rest.”

This new year beckons us, as the body of Christ we are, to travel the two-way spiritual journey of compassion and justice. For the Spirit of God is upon us, too, and we too are anointed to bring good news to the world that God loves so well.

Amen and Blessed Be!