January 19, 2014 Norwalk

Prayers of the People

God of grace, whose presence makes all moments celebration, we give you thanks for these moments and the lives here represented; for the gifts and talents, the energies and wisdom; the vocations and the values that animate not just this service but also life in the community of which we are a part. And we give you thanks for our awareness of joy and abundance: for…​

But not every day feels like a party. We are met with fears and struggles and obstacles and concern, and we lift them to your care, as well:

For the larger church of which we are a part, and our General Minister and President Sharon Watkins, Regional Minister Bill Spangler Dunning, and the shared ministry to which we contribute our efforts;

For the Governor and those state legislators, both experienced and novice, beginning their work together. Bless them with wisdom, forbearance, courage and grace;

For leaders in Washington resuming their work, as well. May the burden of and quest for the common good overshadow any parochial lust for power or prestige or profit;

For the military men and women who put themselves at risk in our name, and the support personnel who undergird them. Bless them with discernment and safety; and those whose political efforts could make the soldiers’ task obsolete: bless them with wisdom and determination.

O God who changes water into wine, bless and transform our days too often flat and empty that we might know and celebrate your abundance and glory. Hear our prayers of joy and intercession, and receive them into your mercy. For we pray in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray saying: Our Father in heaven…

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,*

*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

“No Missing Pieces”

Over the past couple of years I have been working on a book. In fact, I thought I had finished it until one of my readers wrote back to say he really liked the way it was starting and guessed that it was about half done. So much for my smug sense of accomplishment! Along the way I have been pitching it to various publishers, all of whom have respectfully declined the opportunity to house the next “Harry Potter” or “Fifty Shades of Gray.”

OK, so my book project isn’t a fantasy, and it isn’t nearly that sexy. In fact, it isn’t even fiction. It is a project exploring what some might call a “principle of insufficiency.” Which probably explains why no one wants to publish it.

But I rather think it is quite important -- and not the “downer” it sounds like but, in fact, is really quite encouraging and affirming. Over a two year period that ended about the time Lori and I moved to the farm, I and three other ministers (including Dave Clark, husband of Dayna Kinkade) travelled to upstate New York, eastern Vermont, downtown Chicago and the Willamette Valley of Oregon for a series of self-designed retreats devoted to exploring the uniqueness of place – the notion that no place is ***every*** place; that each specific locale – while no doubt having some things in common with others – is ultimately unique and special. In each of those areas we visited farmers and chefs and clergy persons and congregations to learn about the idiosyncrasies of what they do as a function of where they are.

It is an idea that has its roots in agriculture – in the old French term *terroir*, or “taste of place”, and calls attention to the fact that soils are different from place to place; exposure to sunlight varies; and topography makes a difference in where frost settles or wind dries. What grows one place may not grow well in another – or if it grows, will have differing taste profiles because of the differing mineral and environmental conditions.

The reason that a group of clergy folk devoted time and grant money to study these principles was our growing and increasingly reinforced conviction that these same agricultural and culinary principles apply also to congregations and the way they live out their calling. Despite the widespread trends of churches all trying to look and sound alike, the fact once again is that no place is every place. Churches aren’t *Applebees*, and our menus can’t all look the same regardless of where we are located. Places matter because each place is unique. It is particular to that locale. What is essential and natural in one congregation looks silly in another. Strengths will vary. Needs are particular. Opportunities differ.

That is where the element of insufficiency I mentioned earlier comes into play. There are some things that we, as a congregation, simply aren’t going to be able to do very well. In the same way that Iowa farmers can’t grow a very good pineapple, we are never going to be an urban church. We won’t look or taste like a congregation in downtown Chicago -- or even Des Moines. Neither are we capable of being a rural church. We could plant a garden, we can bring our extra tomatoes and peppers and leave them on a fellowship hall table, but we will never succeed in being anything other than the Norwalk church we are.

Not really urban.

Not really suburban.

Not very rural.

Just “Norwalkian.”

When we try to behave like one of those others, we end up tasting like a pineapple grown in Iowa. There are some things for which our particular constellation of assets makes us insufficient.

But the good news is that we don’t have to try to be those things. Elkhart Christian Church and Pleasantville Christian Church are thriving rural congregations, and West Des Moines Christian Church and Lutheran Church of Hope, among others, are thriving, burgeoning suburban congregations. First Christian Church in Des Moines -- where I used to serve -- provides a vibrant center-city ministry for the unique neighbors and neighborhoods that surround it. At the same time, they cannot be a meaningful witness to the gospel here next to the hardware store. Which is to say that for all their visible assets, they, too, are insufficient.

All of which finally draws attention to the rest of the good news: we don’t ***need*** to be all sufficient precisely because we have each other. It is together – in our ***aggregate*** – that we manifest the Body of Christ.

That is becoming an increasingly radical and counter-cultural point of view. ***Difference,*** as we all know, has gotten a bad reputation, with variations from our particular norm either shouted down or more tragically shot up. Because, we have convinced ourselves, our point of view is not only the only one ***necessary***; it is the only one ***permissible***. Almost completely forgotten or willfully abandoned is Paul’s metaphor of the body that he will introduce in the 12th chapter of this letter to the Corinthians, and reiterate to the Romans in the 12th chapter of that letter. His premise is that none of us is sufficient unto ourselves; that we need the plurality and the diversity of the whole body to finally be complete.

Which is to say that the Body of Christ has no need for two of me; it needs me and ***also*** you. It is also to say that the Church in that larger sense does not need two Lutheran Churches of Hope; it needs that one, but it also needs First Christian Church reflecting its terroir, and it needs the New Virginia congregation where Darin serves and Capitol Hill Christian Church on the east side of Des Moines and – well, you get the idea. Because no congregation is independently and unilaterally sufficient. We need each other, being the best and most faithful congregations that each of us can be.

It’s why the plurality of denominations is only a sin when they are divided and estranged, believing that they, alone, have it all. The Church needs those traditions which practice “believer’s baptism” to remind us all that discipleship involves a personal commitment. And people like us need those traditions which practice infant baptism to bear witness to the fact that grace is always utterly unmerited – offered freely when we are least able to earn or merit it.

It is only in our aggregate that we are complete; only through the assembly of our diverse parts and expressions that we are sufficient.

Which is to say that finally we ought to stop bad mouthing each other and start giving thanks for the gifts contributed by those who are very unlike us. Because we need them and the differences they bring.

That, it seems to me, is the foolishness of the pundit battles that have flared over the past few years since a 22-year-old gunman opened fire on a group of people in Tucson, AZ, and a 20-year-old launched an assault on Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT and two brothers detonated a bomb during the Boston Marathon and a 7th grader opened fire in his school last week in New Mexico. One side blames the tragedy on the increasingly strident tone of the culture; the other side insists that there is no cultural implication to draw, that each of these is simply the singular act of solitary persons with evil intent. Now, no one should relieve culpability from the shoulders of these troubled young people. They’ve all made terrible choices for which they must be held accountable. But that judgment hardly means that our common life gets off the hook. When everyone around us – from the White House to the Capitol, to the air-waves and even to the churches – is intent on fanning the flames, no one should be surprised when someone gets hot. We are all involved. We have all played a part.

No body is well-served when its eye says to its ear, “I have no need of you” -- as Democrats and Republicans are intent on saying to one another. It is only together that we are sufficient. Instead of lampooning or maligning those who are different – and certainly instead of envying those who appear to be more successful – we would do better to give thanks for the assets we respectively bring to each other.

Ours, of course, is not a new problem. It is the very dynamic that was crippling the Corinthian congregation to whom Paul was directing the words we’ve read together. Not far beyond the limits of this passage, we wade into jealousies around previous leaders, criticisms about the varieties of gifts, and dividing tensions within the people of faith in that area that are preventing the gospel from flourishing. People, in short, were belittling one another; dismissing one another; trivializing one another – all in an effort to say, in one way or another, that “if only you would be like me everything would be fine and dandy.”

But, Paul would assert from many different angles, “that’s not the way it works.”

“God has enriched you in every way, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift …” But the “you” of whom he speaks is plural – inclusive – gathering into a single reference not only a community of people, but a cluster of house churches in the area. Since I am familiar with this kind of vocabulary, let me translate: it isn’t “you” – as in Tim or Kim or David or Linda – who isn’t lacking any spiritual gift; it is “y’all” who aren’t lacking. We – us – in the collective. But neither is it even “us” in the congregational sense. The gifts are spread further around than that.

Our particular denominational tradition has some experience with this idea. Up until 1968, our inclusive name was “Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ).” But a re-thinking and re-structuring approved that year made a small but important change – we became “The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) – one church, in many congregational and Regional expressions.

All of which is to provide a way of saying that too often we claim both too little and too much – ***too much*** when we as individuals or individual congregations behave as though we were complete unto ourselves; ***too little*** when we are so timid and self-deprecating as to suggest that our contribution is insignificant, or punier than our larger, flashier, more visible counterparts. It is a whole church that God has sufficiently blessed with gifts – not any one single part of it. We can’t grow everything, but what we ***can*** grow is precious. It’s only when we are together that there are no missing pieces.

I suppose it might be simpler if everyone agreed – if everyone believed and voted and worshipped and looked the same. But it certainly wouldn’t be better. Who, after all, needs a constant meal of unseasoned mashed potatoes? We need the expressive differences in each other – in the church and also in the community and world around it. I know that sounds pretty radical in this world in which difference is more comfortably met with fear, suspicion, ridicule and condemnation. But there you have it. It is only when we have us all, sharing the fullness of God’s table, that God calls us complete.

When did we become so confident and self-satisfied in our own capacities and points of view that we forgot the truth that we need all the help we can get? Give thanks, then, for the taste of this place – and for all the other flavors that God has scattered around us. For it is only in our diversity that we are whole; only together that we are sufficient for the task of being the Body of Christ.