

Sermon TUMC June 9, 2013 – Warm Bodies (by Michele Rae Rizoli)

1 Corinthians 12:4-27, Ezekiel 37: 1-10

Youth and kids, I know it's hard and that you normally zone out at this point, but I'd like to dare you to listen to this sermon all the way through. Ideally you'd pay attention, but if that's not working maybe pick a word like body and figure out how many times I say it in the sermon. We can check your count if you come and talk to me later, OK? Or you can tell me later what you don't agree that I said.

Anyway, it all started with a cartoon. The title is “Pastor’s Nightmare #42”¹ (that means there are at least 41 others!). We get a back side view of a middle aged guy standing behind a curtain, peeking at an audience. He’s wearing ill-fitting stripped swimming trunks and a sash across his chest and the caption reads: “Rev. Bob had passed the search committee, the board of elders, and the trial sermon. Now, if he could just make it through the swimsuit competition.” ☺ I’m so glad I’m not in *that* church!

The cartoon certainly captures the feeling of overexposure one gets in a candidating weekend! Besides capturing what I’m feeling right now, it did get me thinking about bodies. Bodies *are* really important.

If we didn’t have a body, we wouldn’t be able to greet each other with a hand shake or a hug, or with a smile. I think it would be pretty hard to be in relationships. We wouldn’t be able to carry our thoughts around, or build things or sing together, or bear children, play box ball, or speak in audible words.

Well, maybe, but we all know how creepy it is to hear a disembodied voice, it’s also the stuff of nightmares!

¹ I clipped it from Leadership Magazine years ago, credited to Mary (?) Chambers.

It turns out that bodies have also inspired some great theological thinking. Yes, youth, I said theological, don't lose me yet please stay with me for a bit longer.

The big main theological thing that we believe about bodies is that Jesus was God taking on the human form. We see Jesus as God's embodied love, love in the form of a body. That's the big one.

There are other ways theology thinks about bodies and one of them comes from the apostle Paul, who wrote the letter to the Corinthians. He compares the church (not the building, the people) to a fully functional body and calls it the body of Christ.

He's saying that when God's Spirit brings people together, there are gifts that show up in people that help them to care for each other in their life of faith: wisdom, faith, knowledge, prophecy, healing, discernment of spirits and so on.

I can certainly vouch for that in my own life. It was in church as a youth that I had a chance to learn to play the guitar, or to teach Sunday school, to lead worship, preach and it's even where I learned to endure, I mean enjoy, church meetings! Church taught me how to stick with my fellow followers of Jesus even when things get tough, even when we're laughing and when we're crying – which I do a lot. What have *you* learned in church?

The search committee asked me to talk this morning about my vision for the youth. And I just want to tell you that I don't personally have a vision for the youth, our church has a vision for the youth. It's been really well articulated in a wonderful document that I'm assuming you've all read. But if you haven't, do. These are the main points. TUMC's vision for youth – and by youth I mean everybody, all the kids, because they will all be youth sooner than we know.

- Faith formation will be at the heart of youth ministry.
- Families will be encouraged and enabled to make the church the centre of gravity in their lives.

- The congregation and youth together will increasingly and creatively engage in all aspects of church life.
- Youth will meaningfully connect with their neighbours, the broader church and the world.
- Youth will gain a sense of welcoming, belonging, community, and group identity.
- Strong leadership among the youth and the adult leaders will support and result from the implementation of TUMC's vision for youth ministry

So really, the vision for youth is the vision for church. After the kids got up and sang this morning and recited those verses and it was clear that this wasn't a performance but a part of how we are worshiping together, I whispered to Marilyn, "I don't think we need a sermon on vision." It's happening already, this is all part of what we dream of for a church where all the generations are important.

When he's comparing the church to a body, Paul comes up with a strange idea. He pictures body parts talking to each other, weird. A foot talking to a hand, an ear talking to an eye. The foot and the ear are basically worried that they don't belong because they don't have opposable thumbs or can't send image messages to the brain.

Well maybe in church the youth and kids are our feet and ears, thinking they are not important. How would the body move forward without feet? How would the eyes know where to turn their gaze if they couldn't hear what's going on?

1) My first point is that each of us (baby, kid, youth, young-medium-or senior adult and everything before and after and in between) is part of the body of Christ in this church. Without the pinky we wouldn't have a full hand, without the hair follicles in our noses we wouldn't have proper air filtration, without toenails... – I'm not sure what would happen without toenails.

In this sense, there is no such thing as "youth ministry." There's only all of us together being a faithful instance of the body of Christ and the Kingdom of God.

But then I took Paul's illustration a bit further because it was kinda fun. I pictured, for example a foot interacting with an eye or an elbow interacting with one's lower back, or the nose touching the back of the knee. – highly unlikely, right? (Well, maybe in yoga)

I began to wonder what keeps such different body parts, with such different purposes and shapes and appearances and preferences as part of the same body. Or if we step out of the metaphor of body, what keeps people of different ages, or different theological perspectives functioning as part of the same church, the same body of Christ? The answer (or one of them at least) is a skeleton, and—one of my new favourite words – the *sinews*.

Basically sinews are tendons, they are a tissue that connects muscles and bones. They are what keeps the basic structure linked and able to move. They are more effective when there's a bit of tension. Hum.

In terms of church, I picture sinews as the relationships we have with each other. We may not be able to stay connected directly with every single other person but when we build strong and resilient relationships with those that we *are* connected with it makes us able to move around and reach out to the world.

2) So my second point is that a body is not really a body without strong relationships that connect all the parts.

Point 1: each of us is part of the body of Christ

Point 2: build strong relationships

Now most good sermons are thought to have 3 points. This one may have more – or maybe not. Stay tuned to find out.

Let me take you down a little side road about bodies for a moment. I want to talk about zombies, i.e. lifeless bodies that somehow manage to move around.

You may have noticed that there are a lot of zombie movies and TV shows out there right now. Have you noticed? There are even events where all kinds of people dress up as

zombies and take to the streets. I don't know, easy costumes? I'm not sure what's going on. Recently I even watched an episode of "Walking Dead" – not a kid's show – it's a show where the world has been taken over by these dead bodies because they have a weird virus. They still walk around and prey upon people with regular bodies. And it's actually kinda creepy and I don't recommend it. But it's in its third season, folks! The walking dead.

Well, I also watched a youtube² video where a guy was explaining this current fascination with zombies (I should give credit to my son Lucas for showing me this). This professor at U of T thinks that the zombie thing is all about our culture's loss of meaning and purpose. He says zombies are just glommed together in a herd consuming and that they never really form community or find a common purpose. This seemed really wise to me.

What do zombies have to do with what I'm saying about the church as a body? Well, that we need to make sure that the church is not a lifeless body, that it *is* providing purpose and true community. This is important in a world that can sometimes be lacking direction and purpose.

The prophet Ezekiel from the Bible lived at a time when God's people were very discouraged about the future. He had all kinds of dreams and words of encouragement and correction for God's people, and this is one of them that might help explain what I'm getting at. So here's a passage from Ezekiel, this is Ezekiel talking:

The hand of the Lord came upon me,
and he brought me out by the spirit of God
and set me down in the middle of a valley – it was full of bones.

God led me all round them;

² Why are zombies so big right now? by John Vervaeke <http://youtu.be/iSwAbQD-gZU> See also his reflections on wisdom: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpVVcVRkLok>

there were very many lying in the valley,
and they were very dry.
God said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?'
I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.'

Then God said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them:
O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.
Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you,
and you shall live.
I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you,
and cover you with skin, and put breath in you,
and you shall live;
and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded;
and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise,
a rattling,
and the bones came together, bone to its bone.
I looked, and there were sinews on them,
and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them;
but there was no breath in them.

Then God said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal,
and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God:
Come from the four winds, O breath,
and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'
I prophesied as he commanded me,
and the breath came into them,
and they lived,
and stood on their feet,
a vast multitude.

...

Quite the vision. Dry bones getting flesh on them and coming back to life.

What makes Ezekiel's vision different from this zombie trend? Well, for one it's different because it is about hope, not despair. But it has another key difference and here's the clue: The book of Ezekiel was written in a language called Hebrew. In that language, the word for breath and Spirit and wind are all the same word.

What he saw in his vision was people being given life by reconnecting, becoming embodied – getting bodies, ready to touch and feel -- and most importantly by being open to the breath, the Spirit of God. We're not really told the age range of this multitude he saw, you know why? Because it doesn't matter. The vision of embodied spirit-filled life is for the whole people of God.

Now, if breath and Spirit are the same word, here's another short story that I really like and I'd like you to consider.

As you know, in Zen meditation, or mindfulness meditation, it's really important to practice on your breath. And it often starts with taking 3 deep breaths, let's try it.

Well, one day, a Zen student complained to his master that focusing on the breath was boring. The Zen master grabbed this student and held his head under water for quite a long time while the student struggled to come up. Zen masters apparently have more effective teaching methods than Christian Education does. ☺ Anyway, when he finally let the student up, the Zen master asked him whether he had found breath that boring.³

3) My third and last point – see, it is only three – is that what gives the church life is the breath of the Spirit. God's Spirit is what gives us purpose, builds community, strengthens relationships and nurtures our vision.

³ Jack Kornfield "Training the Puppy: Mindfulness and Breathing", in Talking to God, Portrait of the world at Prayer, Stone Creek Publications, 2006

You ask about my vision for the youth and it's the same as my vision for the church: that we all be valuable and valued parts in our diversity, that we continue to be in relationships that connect and strengthen, and most importantly that we take deep, deep breaths of God's Spirit.

To conclude, I draw your attention to a lovely poem by of a mystic called Teresa of Ávila:

“Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world.

You are the hands, you are the feet, you are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” Amen.