

## **January 24, 2010 – Third Sunday after Epiphany**

### **“Vital Contributions”**

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

It seems almost impossible that just over a little over a year ago many of us were glued to our television sets listening with eager anticipation to the inaugural address of President Barack Obama. For the most part the country was wild with expectation. This new charismatic leader who seemingly came out of nowhere in his brilliant speech given at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 was now to be installed as the first African American President in our nation's history. I took the day off, sat (rather stood) as he took the oath of office and listened intently as he offered his words of optimism and hope to a nation – our nation – that was on the brink of financial disaster and embroiled in a war that appeared to have no end.

Despite all evidence to the contrary – many of us held in our hearts the possibility that things would soon be better. This new Kennedy-like figure would surely usher in a new day, our problems would be solved, all would be well.

The crowd that gathered in Washington D.C. on that bitter cold January morning was not unlike the crowd that had gathered some 2,000 years earlier in Nazareth (oh well a couple of million less, I suppose) to hear similar words of hope as Jesus – of Nazareth – the hometown boy – also offered words of hope to people in distress. Jesus, in a similar manner offers his inaugural address as the book of the prophet Isaiah is handed to him and he reads words that will define his public ministry – a ministry that is just about to begin.

In Luke's gospel – this is the very beginning for Jesus. There have been no miracles, no healings, no one raised from the dead, no real appearances sans the great unveiling that occurred in his baptism – when the heavens opened and the voice of God was heard. Jesus, seemingly out of nowhere comes before the people and offers hope and optimism, a day of the Lord's favor when all debts are forgiven, goods are distributed equitably, and a new “politics of compassion” is proclaimed where the poor receive good news, the captives are set free, and the blind regain their sight. It's a brand new day as God's kin-dom is inaugurated and all are cared for.

Their respective messages receive initial acclaim. Obama is the new hope of a bi-partisan nation. The politics of the past would now be set aside. A time of working together – of reaching across the aisle – would be the new order of the day as the vitality of the nation took precedence over the needs of the individual. His emphasis on community service, cooperation, and achieving common goals seemed to shadow the

pressing realities that would rear their ugly heads, once again, as the honeymoon rapidly drew to a close.

It didn't take long for Jesus ministry to undergo a similar fate as the words quickly changed from, "Is this not Joseph's son? How did he get to be so smart?," to the reality described later by Luke – "When they really listened to what he was saying, they were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so they might hurl him off the cliff.

So much for optimism, hope, and being enthralled with a new leader. I suppose, sooner or later, we realize they are all merely human.

But what does that say about us – we who listen intently to those optimistic words in hopes that maybe **this** time things will be different? Whether loosely identified – as a nation – or more strongly bonded – as a church – we are listeners, but don't we have a responsibility to bring about the dream, the vision as articulated by our leader?

While I'll not dip my toe into the political waters of our country and comment on the role of individual citizens in a larger national agenda, I would like us, for a moment, to reconsider the words of Paul as he articulates a vision for the church and how it is to participate in affecting the common good. Using the image of a body, Paul challenges the Corinthian congregation to not be so concerned with their individuality, but rather to consider their unity by remembering it takes all parts working together for the body to function properly.

Recently, I've begun taking some Yoga classes in order to increase both my flexibility and to spend some intentional time integrating my understanding of the connection between mind-body-and spirit. The problem is I never knew such discoveries could be so painful. But it is amazing, when instructed to get into some of the most impossible poses – and to hold them for extended periods of time – to realize just how many parts of the body there really are – and how many muscles typically go unused in the course of a lifetime – you do begin to realize just how complicated the human body really is.

Did you know that the human body has 206 bones, 639 muscles, and about 6 pounds of skin – not to mention all the ligaments, cartilage, veins, arteries, blood, fat, and much, much more. Every time we hear a sound; every time we take a step; every time we take a breath, hundreds of different parts work together so that what we experience is a single movement, our minds and bodies working as one unit. The human body represents one of the most complex systems in existence.

That is why the body is one of the most powerful images for the church offered in scripture. The metaphor conveys both complexity and organic unity. But the difficulty arises when we try to figure out our part. Where do we belong? What do we bring? What vital contribution do we make?

We must first realize that **we belong to the body**. We enter into this body through baptism. We come to the water of baptism as individuals, independent and relatively self-contained (screaming and all). But we emerge from that water changed. Our identity is no longer solitary; we can no longer truly be known without reference to that community into which we have been incorporated; the body of Christ – the church. After baptism we are more than just ourselves; we are by definition beings-in-relationship. We belong here and that is a powerful affirmation.

In a world that values above all else rugged individualism – our baptism is a powerful reminder that we belong to the faith community – in this case Mission Hills United Church of Christ and your belonging implies that you are a vital part of the whole.

As Paul reminds, “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?” In short, each part – each participant is essential – and each must do his or her job in order for the body to function as it is intended.

We belong to the body and **our role is to participate in the body**.

If you have the time, I encourage you to attend the initial presentation that will be made today by the strategic planning team in a forum that will be held following worship. The reason for this planning is grounded in these two passages that have become our focus today. To be sure, the plan is being formulated so that we might be wise stewards of the resources currently at our disposal – and it incorporates our best guess at the direction our church ought to be taking as it grows and an emerges into the community God is calling us to be. But it’s much more than that. The plan is grounded theologically in the understanding that we are called to be a “community of compassion” – one that senses the needs of the world around us and is eager to respond. And it also understands that every single member of this community has a role to play – a vital contribution to make – in the emerging process.

The plan is not just a compilation of venn diagrams, flow charts, and endless lists of statistics – rather, I believe, it is a spiritual plan for our future – one that recognizes that

it will be incomplete **if** your story, your perspective of the journey, your vital contribution is missing.

Verses 25 & 26 remind us that there is to be no dissention in this body because the members of the body care for one another. When one member suffers, all suffer together with it; when one is honored, all rejoice with it. This is more than making casseroles for someone in need or throwing a party for someone celebrating. It is that but so much more. It's about being a community that shares its life.

Too many of our relationships are functional, existing in order to do or achieve something. But our relationships in Christ – as part of the church – in a sense have no purpose beyond themselves. They exist as a visible expression of the love of God – which simply takes delight in the other.

When times are difficult it is so easy to segregate, to blame, to classify, to hunker down and to forget Jesus' prayer for the church "that they may all be one." But in **this** place we must always remember, each and every one, that we are loved by God – that we are gifted individually by God – that in our baptism we have been included in the body of Christ – and that we have a responsibility to participate in God's "community of compassion" by offering our vital contribution to the whole.

The charismatic leader can only do so much – it's up to the charismatic – the gifted community to change the world.

Amen