

“When We Just Don’t Have it”

Sermon by Bishop Thomas J. Bickerton

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31(NRSV)

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

- I. One of the interesting facets of scripture is that it not only provides a picture of the ideal with words of hope and inspiration, it also speaks out of a particular context that gave rise to those words being thought of, inspired by God, and ultimately spoken.

One of those clear places where an event in history gave rise to certain words being spoken is Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. Ancient Corinth was a place of diversity of thought and action. It was kind of the Las Vegas of the ancient world. It was a city noted for sexual promiscuity and great discord. And, true to form, the new church that emerged there was also filled with conflict and confusion. There were fights among people who thought that they should be the leaders, issues of incest, prostitution, idolatry, chaos in worship, individualism, and “my way or no way” determinism. You name it, Corinth had it. It was not a place of peace and harmony.

In the midst of this mess, the Apostle Paul spoke out. He founded the church there and cared deeply for the people. His hope was that the people could find a way together so that the gospel could be spread to the people.

The beautiful words about the connectedness of the body that I read to you from I Corinthians 12 were not the reality of life in Corinth. Instead, they were the words of hope that Paul longed for among the people of Corinth. They were reminders, words of encouragement, a goal to shoot for. They were stated in the midst of great division and dissention. They were the model, the ideal, the hoped-for outcome that, with God's help, might somehow become the reality. Listen to the concepts Paul spoke about:

- We were all baptized into one body and made to drink of one Spirit.
- The body is not one idea but many.
- Everyone's gifts are valued.
- There are many members but one body.
- We need each other.
- God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.
- If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.
- You are the body of Christ.
- There are varieties of gifts and not everyone has all that it takes to make the body of Christ function.
- Strive the greater gifts and I will show you a better way than how you are currently living.

These are great words for us. Needed words for us. But, like Corinth, they are not words of reality. Instead, they are aspirational words of what a true beloved community can and show look like.

- II. When I was in Junior High, I grew six inches between my 8th & 9th grade years. I became tall, lanky, and very uncoordinated. I always had an aspiration to play sports but because of my rather late and sudden growth spurt, I was not a good athlete. But I wanted to be.

One day in gym class, I was trying to prove to myself and to everyone else that I could play basketball. In a slick move, I stole the ball off of the opposing player and began to drive the ball to the basket. But, about halfway there I bounced the ball off of my growing feet, leaving me in a mad scramble with the opposing player for the ball.

When the skirmish ended, I got up off the floor and noticed something was wrong. My hand was separated from my wrist. I went over to the bench and said, "*Coach, there's something wrong with my arm.*" The coach said, "*Yep, there is. Bickerton, you've broken your arm.*"

What took place then for the remainder of that day was nothing short of agony. I had to wait for my mom to come to school to pick me up. It took forever. And then, for six hours I sat in the waiting room of the ER waiting for a doctor to come and cast my arm. And, with every passing hour, the pain got worse and worse and worse. The throbbing became intense. If I could have fixed my arm, I would have. But I couldn't and I had to

wait for someone to intervene who could cast my arm and begin the healing process. I thought it would never happen.

- III. It's a simple illustration. Not very profound. Not extremely impactful. But it does describe how I feel today. I feel like we, as a church, are sitting in an Emergency Room. We are broken. A part of our body is separated from the rest of it. We are not together. The pain is getting worse with every passing day. The throbbing is becoming more intense. We need healing and it feels as if it's never going to happen. If we could fix it ourselves, we would. But we need help.

It's very much like Paul's words to Corinth. They are aspirational words. Words that should be the goal to which we work: healing, taking care of one another, fixing and uniting a broken body. They are the ideal of how a group of Christian people should behave together.

But here's the reality. Currently, we are not the body of Christ as it is described in Corinthians.

Here is what we know today.

1. We are divided.

There is no semblance of unity in the body of Christ called United Methodism today. The line in the sand that has been drawn over the issues we are facing is not a line at all. It is a canyon. It is so deep and so wide that we cannot see the bottom. Nor can we see the other side. The lack of respect and the degree of distrust is at an unbelievable place.

The vote on the floor of the General Conference was ultimately decided by 27 votes. If 27 people had voted a different way, the outcome would have been different. 27 votes impacted the lives of 12 million people. I don't know about you, but when I have been in local church meetings where the numbers were that close, I didn't go home believing that we had made a decision as much as I went home trying to figure out how to address the deep division that issue had caused.

No one should be claiming victory in this story. While the halls of congress and the world of sports can talk about winners and losers, this is not acceptable language in the life of the church. With such a close vote, there are no winners, and perhaps it is a better representation to say that maybe we are all losers.

Still, there is a side claiming victory. And there is a side that feels very clearly that they have lost. The body is fractured and divided. And if that story wasn't bad enough, the New York Times investigative report that came out on Thursday revealed that there was impropriety in the actual votes taken, causing even those slim margins of victory to be thrown into deep question. That investigation is not complete even today and the credible decision of the Commission on the General Conference to work with the New York Times in finding the facts to this story, that many of us had assumed was true for years, only reveals that the division we feel is a division that is real. Some will do anything to get their way, even at the cost of the credibility of the process. This is not an example of the ideal behavior found in the body of Christ.

We are divided. That reality is more real here in New York than many want to admit. There are some in this room who are breathing a sigh of relief that a Traditional Plan was approved and there are some in this room who are devastated by the very same decision. Strong cultural drivers come into play as many here embrace a traditional value. If you doubt it, come with me to most of the Long Island West District. Or come with me to the interior parts of Connecticut or to some pockets of the Catskills. On the other side is a strong progressive voice of advocacy and inclusion. There are lay and clergy members of this annual conference who have taken bold stances against injustice, inequality, and discrimination for years. We have positions that have been taken in recent years by our Annual Conference and our Board of Ordained Ministry that have stated our clear position on who we see ourselves to be as an inclusive body of Christ. If nothing else happened in St. Louis the decision of the General Conference has only reinforced those deep convictions with renewed strength.

But for anyone to say that New York is a place of one theological perspective or is in one agreement about the matters before us only reveals that they do not understand the depth of the division that exists here.

We are not the body of Christ as Paul describes. What we are resembles the actual state of the church in ancient Corinth more than the ideal put forth by the Apostle. And as a result, we run the real risk of beating each other up for the sake of our position. And, because the pain is so deep, we are even turning on people of like mind. It gets to the point where no one can say anything that is right because we are unable to hear clearly, or to love gently, or forgive even the smallest of mistakes.

When I was a local church pastor, every year I would stand in front of my congregation and say the same thing during the service to celebrate my reappointment to the congregation. These were the words I would say,

“During this next year as your pastor, I will do something that will disappoint you. I will say something that will unintentionally hurt you. I will at some point let you down. Please know that I acknowledge my humanness and my shortcomings. Please know too that it was not my intent. And when those things happen, I would ask that you forgive me. But know this as well. During this next year, you will do something that will disappoint me. You will say something that will unintentionally hurt me. You will, at some point, let me down. We are all human and filled with shortcomings. And when that happens, please know that I will be praying that I can find the Christ within me to forgive you.”

Friends, this is a very tender and yet a very critical time for us as a church and as an Annual Conference. Decisions that have been made are today being questioned and examined. The division between us is significant and I wonder, both as a denomination and as an Annual Conference, if we can find a way together moving forward.

There was a plan before the General Conference called the *“One Church Plan.”* It was flawed, just like all the other plans before us. But one of the things that gave me hope about it was the reality that this plan has been operational within the bounds of the New York Annual Conference for years. Traditional viewpoints and styles were operational in the midst of progressive viewpoints and expressions. I said to many who were doubtful of whether such a plan could work, *“Just come to New York. We’ve been doing it for years.”* But there has been across the spectrum of United Methodists, a segment of

people who have wanted extreme conformity rather than contextual freedom. That was the vote that was narrowly approved. But legislation does not convert the heart. Just because the vote went a certain way, we cannot expect conformity to follow. There are different ways that you do ministry here in New York. Urban, suburban, & rural. Conservative, moderate, and liberal. The list goes on. Conformity to one way of doing things cannot happen. It won't. I don't expect it to and I won't be working for it to happen. It isn't the ideal we strive for and is not the dream the Apostle Paul longed for when he simply said, *"There are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'*

I must admit, in all honesty, that I have lost faith in the ability of the church to deal with our differences in a legislative process. We have given it the *"old college try"* for 47 years now and it hasn't worked. The scenario is the same: every four years petitions are drawn up and faithful people go to the General Conference hoping for a change. The change doesn't happen. Some go away happy and others are told, *"Too bad. Come back in four years and try again."* They do and the same scenario unfolds. Some are happy and others are told to try again in four years. And every four years the pain gets deeper, and the frustration gets higher to the point that, now, the culture has raced past the church and we have lost relevancy in reaching people for Christ.

A conservative friend of mine said to me the other day, *"What am I missing here. We are a part of a club. There are those who want to change the rules of the club. But the club doesn't want to change the rules. There has to be a point where the club says, we are not going to change the rules so you're going to have to find another club. What am I missing here?"*

My reply is simple: We are not a club. We are the body of Christ, and we are called to make sure that everyone has a place in our church. But I went further: I told him that there are any number of historical clubs that are now lying on the roadside dead because they could not adapt to changing times. One strong club, the Rotary Club, used to mandate that you had to attend their lunch meetings 3 out of every 4 weeks in a month or you would be removed. They altered their rules at one point and allowed for people traveling out of town to attend makeup meetings there. And then they relaxed their rules when it became apparent that they wouldn't survive if they didn't relate to the needs of their members. They reached the point where they discovered, we either adapt or we die. If we continue to insist on conformity without an appreciation for contextual diversity, we too will die.

But as it stands today, we are divided.

Here is what we know.

2. There is deep hurt within the body.

My dear friend and New York native, Bishop Karen Olevito, has shared with me that the difference this year than in previous years is the widening spectrum of people that have been affected by the decisions of the General Conference. Remember, 2/3rd of the U.S. delegates voted for a change in the church's direction. The circle is widening in this country for a change. Here's what we know:

- Shortly after returning home from St. Louis, Bishop Oliveto received a visit from 25 members of a centrist congregation in Colorado who presented her with their membership certificates and announced that they could no longer be United Methodist.
- A college classmate of mine who is an Old Testament seminary professor has declared that he is struggling with a decision of whether or not he will remain a United Methodist.
- The largest donor at one of our most progressive congregations announced last Sunday that this would be his family's last Sunday as a United Methodist. The pain is just too deep.
- There is a family in another local church that announced that they no longer could be United Methodist. The father said to the pastor, *"I have two daughters. One is heterosexual. The other is homosexual. They both are getting married. For one, the church celebrates her marriage. For the other, the church refuses to celebrate her marriage. How can my family be a part of a church that says yes to one of my daughters and no to the other? The church is dividing my family and we can no longer be a part of it."*
- Since St. Louis, nearly every day in my office I have received at least one letter from a person or family that have announced that they no longer will be a part of the United Methodist Church.

The pain is deep and widespread.

I don't know about you, but this is not what I signed on for when I accepted my own call. My calling has not had anything to do with spreading heartache and pain. It has been, quite honestly, the opposite. It has broken my heart to see and experience the church I love create such hurt among people.

There is no one that has experienced this pain and hurt more than the LGBTQIA community. We can sing songs about a place at the table and talk glowingly about how we welcome people with open hearts, open minds and open doors, but the reality is we don't. We gathered at the table in St. Louis, in large measure, to talk about the LGBTQIA community and did not invite them to the table to be a part of the conversation. Except for New York! But in spite of that presence, we as a church, once again invalidated your callings and deemed you to be less than the rest of us.

It is one thing to say that we cannot abide by a decision that, for the most part was ruled unconstitutional and has been approved by a body where there is proven evidence of impropriety in the voting. But it's another thing to declare that we can no longer be a body that is literally killing itself by imposing hurt and pain on any of God's children. We can no longer be that kind of body.

And this is how the world is viewing us. Our public witness is, in large measure, gone because we cannot find a way to love one another and embrace the validity of one another's calling from God to share the love of Jesus Christ with the world. It's hurtful and embarrassing.

While we were in St. Louis, in less than a half day after the decision was initially made, over 15,000 young people from around the world came together to sign a letter of support for the LGBTQIA community. They were from Africa, Europe, the Philippines and the United States. They said, *“We are not of one mind when it comes to the inclusion of our LGBTQIA siblings in Christ. And yet, through sharing stories, and worshipping side by side we have seen each other’s gifts and fruits for ministry. We have witnessed the incredible ways that God is working through each of us in our own unique contexts. We believe that if we are truly a body we need each other. We need one another in all of our diversity to fulfill our call to be the body of Christ. We as the church need to stop the harm that is done when we debate one another’s humanity and worth, and focus on our shared mission to live into our primary identity as God’s children.”*

It was a beautiful. It was something once again demonstrated the leadership of our young people. They are calling us, like Paul called Corinth, to be the body of Christ.

It is my calling to you as well.

As your leader, I will provide an unwavering, undying support for the LGBTQIA community here in New York. We must continue to work for full inclusion and make our words turn into actions that demonstrate our support. I will do everything I can to support and authenticate your calling and your ministry. During my time with you here in New York, I have been blessed and amazed by your gifts for ministry, your dedication to Christ, your love for the church. Pastors, you have hard work to do as you attempt to bring a relevant gospel of grace, love and inclusion to the communities where you are serving. I will do everything I can to support you and be behind you in that hard and faithful work that you are called to do.

In Germany, the church there has said, *“We want to stay together as a church where people of differing opinions can live with each other. We don’t want to let go of each other and we don’t want to separate from each other, but we want to hold on to each other and to be there for each other. For we are convinced that Jesus wants to use us and our gifts jointly and together.”*

Don’t you? Don’t we?

I do. I want to be a church that finds ways to fall in love with each other rather than one that creates categories that alienate us from one another.

The widening gap that exists in our church has been created by alienating our LGBTQIA pastors, laity, friends and supporters. I believe that we must be supportive and work tirelessly so that we can be the inclusive and affirming conference that we say we are.

Pastors, you have hard work to do on the front lines of this challenge. You minister to LGBTQIA persons and their families. And the difficulty in holding them close to our hearts has grown more challenging. I simply say to you: Love your people and demonstrate to them what love, respect, and dignity look like.

We have demonstrated in the last couple of weeks that we cannot legislate the change. I have also come to wonder whether or not we can continue as a global church. But we

can model what the change looks like and live into it with faithfulness and love. And we need to do so now in the midst of great pain and hurt.

Here is the third thing we know.

3. We are called to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

Hear these words from Colossians 3:12-17:

¹² As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³ Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[a] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ^[b] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.^[c] ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

These are extremely hurtful times. And when we get hurt we are so tempted to return hurt with hurt. I am truly afraid that we will turn on one another, even those who are supportive, and consume one another with hatred and pain.

These words from Colossians are so simple, yet so powerful. We are chosen from God. And as chosen ones, we are called to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek and patient with one another. We are called to bear with one another and forgive one another. We called to love and to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts.

There is a phrase that the church adopted in 1972 that began this 47-year struggle over human sexuality. The phrase was "*incompatible with Christian teaching.*" But I want to take that phrase in a different direction. I honestly believe that if we do not embody compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness and love for one another, especially in these days of great pain and heartache, then we will begin to demonstrate a life and a work that truly is "*incompatible with Christian teaching.*"

In recent days I have had sleepless night after sleepless night wondering about what I could do and how I could lead. And in my dark nights of the soul, there is only one answer. I'm going to love. And when it doesn't work, I'm going to love again. And when it isn't popular or trendy or innovate or provocative enough, I'm going to try to love instead. My mission, as it has always been, and I pray always will be, is to love.

But today, I must be honest, I really wonder if we can. I really wonder if we can. I want us to be together. But I truly wonder if it's possible.

There are many efforts underway throughout the church exploring what options are before us. Some of those, quite honestly, are discussions about us not being together any more. Some of those, quite honestly, are about purging the church of those who are not desirable to some. And I fear, that some of those conversations believe that

somehow the decisions of the recent General Conference have given permission to some to further racism, gender bias, and white privilege.

Some of the conversations out there are looking for compliance. Some of those conversations are looking for prophecy. But compliance without grace is cruel, and prophecies without a strategy for implementation are only shallow words that have no end result. It's complicated, to be sure. But interwoven into our pain and interspersed into our conversations God calls us to be compassionate, kind, humble, meek and patient with one another.

But today, I wonder if we truly can.

- IV. These last couple of weeks have been so difficult for me personally. I have not ached one bit over offering a consistent and intentional support to the LGBTQIA community. I have not ached over supporting our pastors and laity as they lead with grace and make decisions that will require my support and encouragement. I've not ached over offering support for our churches of many cultures and ethnicities who are attempting to reach out in their context to offer the gospel to others.

My heartache has been over the sadness I feel over my church potentially falling apart at the expense of a mission to offer the world hope, promise, possibility, love and joy.

In recent days I have been reading Psalm 51:

- Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
- ³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
- ⁵Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- ⁶You desire truth in the inward being;^[a]
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- ¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right^[b] spirit within me.

- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing^[c] spirit.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- 15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
- 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God^[c] is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

A broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart. That says it. That's what I have, a broken and contrite heart. And that's what many of you have. A broken spirit. But, it's what God truly wants from us. God does not want false sacrifice or shallow attempts to "declare" that we are faithful. God wants more.

I have a broken spirit and a broken heart over the pain and hurt my church is inflicting on others. I'm weary that the LGBTQIA community does not have an inclusive place at the table of the church. I'm tired of sitting in a cabinet meeting hearing a superintendent report that a church does not want to accept a person of color as their pastor. I'm weary of hearing another superintendent state that the leadership of a local church does not want a woman pastor. I'm tired of us inflicting heartache and pain. I'm just tired of it. It causes a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart.

For 40 years I have joyfully stood in a pulpit Sunday after Sunday, somedays with a good sermon and sometimes with a poor one. But every Sunday I have stood there with a word of hope and promise for the church I was serving. But honestly, today, for the first time I can remember, I don't have a word of hope. I have a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart.

But I was ministered to the other day by a colleague of mine who simply said, "*You know, Tom, it seems to me that God has plenty of experience dealing with broken and contrite hearts.*" Everywhere you turn in the Bible there is someone with a broken heart or a broken spirit and there is a subsequent story that in effect says, "*Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.*"

Isn't that the truth?

When we don't have it, God does. When we can't muster up a word of hope in the midst of our brokenness, God can. How appropriate that we find ourselves here in the Season of Lent. A time of inner examination and renewed spiritual discipline. A time when we either shed ourselves of some bad habits or take some new ones on as a part of a Lenten journey of sacrifice and reflection.

And how good it is to know that when a human system that wants to double down on punishment of people of sacred worth, and their families and friends, we worship a God system that says there we can be better than that and there is something more.

- V. At the General Conference there are reports that are offered and voted on. The General Conference voted to continue to block an open door for full inclusion. It was the vote of the majority.

But when someone disagrees with the action of the body at General Conference, they have the right to file a “minority report” which is, an alternative to consider.

Here is my “Minority Report.”

To quote Rev. Paul Purdue, the pastor at Belmont UMC in Nashville, TN:

Let us be bold but not rash. We need time with God and each other in order to heal, weigh, and plan our best response. We need the wilderness spiritual testing ground so that in our resistance to evil, we do not become overcome by the practices we deplore. But hear this my LBGTQIA friends, you are made in the image of God!

Here is my Minority Report. When you feel hatred coming your way, return it with love. When you see someone with whom you disagree do not judge but love. In all things do good, do no harm, and stay in love with God. Breathe, just breathe, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts so that you can love and, as Micah said, “*Do Justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.*”

And remember, always remember, that while today might feel like Good Friday, thanks be to God, Sunday is coming and while we may have lost faith in ourselves we can maintain faith in a God who is truly able!

It’s like my broken arm. The doctor came. My hand was put back in place and casted. And it healed.

With God’s help, so can we.

I’m trying to remind myself of these things. I hope you can too.

Let us pray.