

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Welcome to holy conferencing! It is a joy to see you all together here, all our eyes, our ears, our feet of Christ, together, in one place. My heart feels lifted up when we're here in this room together every few months, ready to talk about how we're doing God's work, and how we can do it in the months ahead.

The next few months will be very important months in the history of The United Methodist Church. On February 23rd, our global Special Conference of the church will start to redefine how our church addresses human sexuality. We really don't know what this conference will do, but it is clear that changes are ahead for United Methodists, no matter what. Because of this, our bishop has called for a Special Session of our New York Annual Conference on Saturday, March 16th. I will be attending, along with Jeanne King, our conference Lay Delegate. Jeanne and I will keep you informed on what is happening as the result of this conference.

Regardless of what happens, I think that we can be sure of one thing: it is hard for us, and for most people, to act like the body of Christ, together. It's always been hard. It's why Jesus came into the world. Jesus came so that we could become something together that the world had never seen before. Until Jesus, the world had never seen a people, around the world, bound together by something other than family, or tribal loyalties, or the color of their skin, or the size of their wallets, or their address, or their obedience to the might and the gods of powerful rulers.

Jesus called everyone to forge ties with the living God, and with one another, that were completely different from what people had ever imagined. Imagine what it was like for the people of Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus, when he spoke in the town synagogue. In today's reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus, the son of a poor carpenter, told them that he had come to free the poor, the sick, the condemned, the cursed - you know, the ones who were afraid to show their face at their place of worship. God was no longer picking favorites to invite into God's story of salvation. Everyone was invited - and needed.

It can be easy to forget how radical God's invitation from Jesus really is. Everyone is invited into the life of God, through Jesus. And, everyone is needed in Jesus, by God. Some may not be that strong in Jesus. Some may not be that sure in Jesus. Some may stumble in Jesus. But God wants the world in Jesus. That is the meaning of the word "church." In the original Greek of our New Testament, it is *ecclesia*, meaning, everyone coming together. If we're not all together, then we're not the church, Amen?

The apostle Paul knew this, and he had a great way of putting it, in his first letter to the Corinthians. The Corinthians were an early church in the Greek city of Corinth. It was an "anything goes" kind of city, and a "do your own thing" city, too. People in this early church were used to having their little cliques, cutting out others who were a bit different. People were thinking that they were together, as the church, but often the Corinthians were people who just happened to worship in the same place. They were pieces of the body of Christ, but not a body.

Paul told these rebellious Christians that their independence was killing the body of Christ. A body can't live with just a head, or an eye, or a nose, or a foot. And the body has

important parts that we may not be proud of, and parts that we are proud of. We need all of these parts of our body to be a body. We need all the people in Christ to be the body of Christ. It can't be just people who think, and act, and look like us. It has to be everyone, together.

Our church is the body of Christ in some healthy ways. Our finances are sound. We have well maintained properties. We have heart moving worship. We take care of our people, and we have a strong commitment to overseas missions, and caring for refugee families through our Unity House mission teams. These are all good things.

But we can also see where we have neglected God's mission for the body of Christ, in places that are important for the health and growth of our church, and for the growth of God's mission. We have dozens of young children and their families coming through our education building, and we are not in ministry partnerships for their sake. We have hundreds of children and their families, coming and going from Hanover Elementary school, and we are not in ministry partnerships for their sake. We have families using Habershon Field every year, and we are not in ministry partnerships for their sake. We have prayer walks every Monday, circling the businesses and services and homes of our community, and we are not yet in strong ministry partnerships with them, for their sake.

We are at a turning point, not only in the history of The United Methodist Church, but in this church, and in many churches like our church. Like many churches, we've been hearing about the need for change, but not changing. We have moved along, in the same old patterns, avoiding new patterns, that can draw not just us, but people around us, into the body of Christ. We have settled for letting ourselves and others go our own way, apart from the body of Christ. Because of this the body of Christ looks more like a bunch of similar and rebellious body parts, than a living, growing reflection of God's love on earth.

Christ will come again, no matter what. Christ comes, every day, and will keep on coming, until the end of time, offering us all a common good, an image of wholeness, power, and peace, that comes only from being in the body of Christ. And if everyone has decided to live and die selfishly, instead of living now and eternally together, in the love and power of Christ, then Christ will be coming to a dead world, day in, and day out. The life-saving, soul-saving bonds of love, forged by Jesus on a cross, for our sake, can save us only when we live in Christ, and share Christ with our equally imperfect neighbors, right here, and everywhere, for God's common good.

We may think to ourselves: well, I am not cut out for that. I don't have the gifts to be in the body of Christ; I am too weak, too tired, too broken, too uninformed, too small, too different, to make a difference in God's church. If you do think that, you are wrong. You are dead wrong. The foot needs the eye. The eye needs the hand. The head needs the foot. We are all linked to one another in Christ, like a beautiful chain, a chain that links us to the love that has flowed from Christ for two thousand years. The weakest link in God's life-saving chain of love in Christ is not the poor person, the sick person, the person who feels that they have no special talent or strength. The weakest link in the chain of love that is Christ is...the link that's not linked.

Look around this room. You are the ones who can be the body of Christ. We aren't all apostles, or prophets, or teachers, or miracle workers, or healers, or helpers, or leaders, or communicators. But each one of us has gifts forged from the love of Christ, gifts that we all need, together, and that God's world needs, in action, together. People who have been here a long time need new people. New people need long-timers. The young need older people. Older people need younger people. Men need women, and women need men. We all need people who aren't like us, to be who God meant us to be.

Sometimes being together is hard. In an age when it's so easy to turn the channel, or turn to a new app or Web page, or a new message on our phones, we can forget that Jesus didn't come to forge the body of Christ from the people who Jesus liked. Jesus came to make the body of Christ out of the people who God wanted to save. The people in this church, and all around this church in our city, and around the world, need Christ, every single day. None of us has to be the whole solution. But we all need to be in the solution that is Christ, and to accept the diversity that God needs and wants, in Christ, to make it happen.

None of us knows what this church will look like a year from now. But my hope, and my prayer, is that we will look more like the body of Christ, each of us working together, including, especially, people who we're not used to working with, inside this church and outside of it, to live together as the body of Christ. Be in the chain that links us all in Christ to God's love. Call back into the chain those who have unlinked from it, and those who never thought of being in it. Let's forge a beautiful new future, together, as the living body of Christ, for our sake, and for the sake of all of God's wonderful creation. Amen.