

## “THE GIFT OF THE CHURCH – OUR CONNECTEDNESS IN CHRIST”

By Bill Vamos

Listen to Jesus’ words as recorded in the Gospel according to John 15, in the J.B. Phillips translation, The NT in Modern English: “You must go on growing in me and I will grow in you. For just as the branch cannot bear any fruit unless it shares the life of the vine, so you can produce nothing unless you go on growing in me. I am the vine itself. You are the branches.”

Note that Jesus is not speaking here to one individual person, but to His community, His family of disciples. The Apostle Paul emphasized this same communal nature of Christian growth when he defined a Christian as a member of Christ’s body, the Church. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 12:27: “Now you are together the Body of Christ, and individually, you are members of Him.” (Phillips) In verse 26, Paul precedes these words by showing the inseparable relatedness of the members of Christ’s body. He says: “If one member of the body suffers all the other members suffer with it, if one part of the body is honored all the members share a common joy.”

There is a story that shows what it means to be members of one body in Christ. There was once a right-handed carpenter who did everything with his right hand, except for one thing and that was pounding nails, which he did with his left hand. You can imagine the jealousy that the left hand felt toward the right hand. After all, who had all the fun? The right hand shook hands in friendly greeting, put the arm around the carpenter’s wife, signed the carpenter’s name, and opened the safe deposit box. While all the left hand did was work.

But one day the situation changed. The left-hand was pounding a nail and it missed. You can guess what it hit –the thumb nail on the carpenter’s right hand.

You would expect the left-hand to react with a feeling of gleeful retaliation. You would expect the left-hand to say: “Well, it serves you right. You’ve gotten all the glory and the privileges. So just take the pain and live with it”.

But you know the left-hand didn’t react that way at all. Instead it went over to the right hand and stroked that thumb nail and said: “It’s all right now, it’s going to be all right.” And all through the night, the left hand kept caressing the right thumb nail: “It’s going to be all right now.”

“If one member of Christ’s body suffers, all the other members suffer with it, “Paul writes, “...and if one member is honored, all the other members share a common joy.” Paul is telling us that in the Body of Christ, we are connected. We are people who help other people through a process of mutual support and mutual ministry.

I imagine that you, members of The First Presbyterian church of Rochelle, are becoming significantly aware of your inter-relatedness with Christ and each other during this time

without a Senior Pastor. You are gaining a deeper and broader appreciation of Jim Tilley's pastoral ministry in your midst, and this is also a time when a church learns how interdependent the members of Christ's Body really are. You are discovering more deeply how to lean on each other, and how the ministry is the responsibility of all of us.

I challenge you to look ahead and determine to continue that spirit of mutual ministry when your Senior Pastor search is completed. God will lead you to the right Senior Pastor for your church. You can keep seeking the leadership of God's Spirit, and asking the Lord to enable you to wait for God's guidance. But, when your next pastor is actually on-board, please don't say: "Well, now we can relax. Nor Reverend so-and-so will do it for us." Instead, say, "Now we enter into a period when our ministry will grow stronger."

Please let your new pastor be a fellow servant with you, bringing you certain needed skills and gifts, rather than a theological superstar.

In his book In the Name of Jesus, Henri Nouwen focuses our need for mutual ministry: Dr. Nouwen is a Roman Catholic priest, who, after several prestigious positions of leadership, has joined a community of handicapped persons called L'Arche. Listen to his words.

I was educated in a seminary that made me believe that ministry was essentially an individual affair. I had to be well-trained and well-formed, (spiritually) and after six years of training and spiritual formation, I was considered well-equipped to preach, administer the sacraments, counsel, and run a parish. I was mad to feel like a man sent on a long, long hike with a huge backpack containing all the things necessary to help people I would meet on the road. Over the years, I realized that things were not as simple as that, but my basic individualistic approach to ministry did not change."

When I went to L'Arche, however, this individualism was radically challenged. There I was one of many people who tried to live faithfully with handicapped people, and the fact that I was a priest was not a license to do things on my own."

Dr. Nouwen continues in the following way:

"You might already have discovered for yourself how radically different traveling alone is from traveling together. I have found over and over again how hard it is to be truly faithful to Jesus when I am alone. I need my brothers or sisters to pray with me, to speak with me about the spiritual task at hand, and to challenge me to stay pure in mind, heart, and body. But far more importantly, it is Jesus who heals, not I; Jesus who speaks words of truth, not I; Jesus who is Lord, not I. This is very clearly made visible when we proclaim the redeeming power of God together. Indeed, whenever we minister together, it is easier for people to recognize that we do not come in our own name, but in the name of the Lord Jesus who sent us."

In the First Presbyterian Church of Rochelle, you already have a mutual ministry in a number of ways – you who are church officers, or committee members, or group leaders, already experience a mutually ministry to one another, and to others beyond this congregation. There are other possibilities, which you can develop now, as you work with Jim, and, as a gift to the new pastor with which you will join in a mutual ministry, such as:

1. Elders or Deacons can begin accompanying Jim when he takes Communion to the sick and shut-in members of your church.
2. People can call, in teams of two, on potential new members.
3. In some cases, your participants in the Stephen ministry can do their calling in teams. Of course, some of the Stephen ministry needs to be done one to one because of the personal nature of some situations, but are there circumstances where Stephen Ministers will be more effective by going out in teams of two
4. Mutual ministry, in and to the market place, can happen by forming a group that focuses on “Christ in Our Places of Work,” a group that calls people together, regularly, to discuss and share and pray together re: specific ways to minister, in the name of Christ, on the job.
5. You can take a look at your church’s ministry, and ask “In what ways can we strengthen our life and mission by forming ourselves into team ministries?”

“Now, you are together the Body of Christ,” Paul writes, “And individually, you are members of Him.” Another way to become aware of our connectedness in Christ’s Body is to see the church as a support system. Please look at the Ingredients of Mutual Support.