

Holy God, teach us to listen to your word, follow your example, and become your holy people. Amen.

Last week, in the children's sermon, we heard that we can be friends with other people even when we like different kinds of vegetables.

If you like zucchini and I like red peppers and someone else likes them both, there's no reason we can't all be friends.

What a person loves should not make a difference to our love for that person.

Last week we also celebrated this congregation's 20th anniversary of being Reconciling in Christ. So, really, being able to like people who differ from us goes much deeper than the kind of vegetables we prefer.

If you are attracted to someone who shares your gender identity, and I am attracted to someone with a different gender identity, and someone else is attracted to people all across the spectrum of gender, there's no reason we can't all be friends.

The same goes for ethnicity.

If you have ancestors from Germany or Ghana or both, there's no reason you can't be friends with someone who has ancestors from Brazil or Botswana or Bulgaria.

If your skin color is light, that doesn't mean you can't have close relationships with people whose skin is dark – and vice versa.

Whether you grew up speaking Chinese or Spanish, English or Cherokee in the home, should make no difference to the people you speak with now, regardless of the language you use.

More to the point, we *need* to be in relationship with people who are different from ourselves. We need to befriend folks of various sexual orientations, gender identities, races, ethnicities, and nationalities. When we do, we all are better than we would be on our own.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome:

For as one body has many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ.

Individually, we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ.

But together, we make up the body of Christ.

Who you are as a follower of Jesus relates directly to who I am as a follower of Jesus. Who both of us are as followers of Jesus relates directly to how the whole body of Christ is able to move and behave in the world.

This is why we need one another. If LGBTQ folks are left out of the body of Christ, Jesus ends up missing an arm or a liver or something.

If people of certain races or ethnicities are left out of the body of Christ, Jesus ends up missing a leg or a lung or two.

Whether we are overweight or underweight, regardless of nationality or race, no matter our sexual orientation, or whether we prefer broccoli or mushrooms, together, we make up the body of Christ.

We need each member of that body in order to fully live as Christ-followers in this world.

It's kind of like working out. If you only work one muscle group, you're going to be super sore, and you probably won't end up with the results you desire.

But if you do some cardio, and then some strength training – and if you switch it up so that you're doing legs one day and arms the next and core the next – your whole body will feel better in the long run.

Strengthening each one of the muscle groups will strengthen the body as a whole, and in turn can make your heart healthier, your metabolism better, and if you're lucky, might even bring you up or down to your ideal pants size.

By recognizing all people as members of the body of Christ, we are working out all the muscle groups and letting one part of the body strengthen another.

When Christians only celebrate certain ethnicities or abilities or ways of being in love, the muscles in Jesus' calves or forearms start to atrophy. The body of Christ loses some of its power.

But when we celebrate all types of people and the ways that we can work together, Jesus' body will become so strong, there will be no limits to what it can do in this world!

Building up the body of Christ is a holy, sacred thing.

Paul said:

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

Sacred means holy.

So a sacrifice is a holy act, or a holy offering.

Traditionally, a sacrifice happened when someone killed an animal, placed it on an altar, and burned it, with hopes that the fragrant smoke rising up would be pleasing to God.

This is also where we get the tradition of using incense in prayer or worship – rather than sacrificing an animal, we burn some fragrant coals to offer a sweet-smelling smoke to God.

Paul gives us a new definition of sacrifice.

Instead of something dead or inanimate, we are to offer *ourselves* at the altar, as living sacrifices. We don't need to die in order to be pleasing to God – rather, we need to live!

By making our whole selves holy, we are completing that holy act or holy offering – that sacrifice.

So how do we do it?

First: don't give in to worldly pressures.

Don't confuse cultural expectations with spiritual success. Just because other folks are behaving in certain ways doesn't mean that they are right.

Let God speak to you. Remain open to the work of the Spirit, and if you feel a divine nudge, follow wherever God is leading.

Prayer is the primary way that God speaks to us. If you haven't felt a divine nudge in your life lately, consider trying out our Sunday morning Centering Prayer group, or our Thursday morning prayer group, or just sit back and listen during the prayer time in worship today.

In order to be a living sacrifice, the first thing that we do is listen for God's will, distinguishing it from the pressures of society.

The second thing that we do is to remain humble.

Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought, says Paul.

Now, this isn't to say that you're not a worthwhile human being. You are. So don't beat yourself up either. Self-confidence is OK.

But selfishness is not.

You are good, valuable, and important.

Just like the person next to you, and the person next to them, and the person next to them.

This is where it becomes important to value people regardless of your similarities or differences to them.

I may think that I'm a pretty important part of the body of Christ. Let's say that I think so highly of myself that I must be Jesus' right hand woman.

OK. I'm the right hand.

But, that hand will be pretty useless unless the veins and muscles and nerves in the arms are working. And if the lungs aren't breathing, and the heart isn't beating, the body isn't going to have any need for the hand.

Don't think too highly of yourself.

No part of the body can function independently from the rest of the body.

Which brings up another point. Sometimes, one part of the body ceases to work the way it's supposed to. Our lungs get infected or an ankle gets twisted.

When part of our body is sick, we need to treat that illness to make the body whole again so that we can get back to living our life.

When part of the body of Christ is sick, we need to find a way to heal it so that Jesus' name isn't dragged through the mud.

If some of our siblings in Christ start to do things that are antithetical to the message of the Gospel, as the healthy members of the body, it is our job to bring them back, to get rid of the infection, and to get us all working together again.

When people start to be conformed to the ways of this world, we need to remind them that Jesus calls us to transformation and renewal.

We all need one another.

In community we each fulfill our particular role, so that Jesus' body can do God's work in this world. And we do our part to help the rest of the body as well, without getting distracted by the temptations of the world.

Imagine, for example, a team of sixty people all working toward a common goal. Each person chooses to do something that they enjoy and can do well. Someone is the heart, someone is the stomach, and someone is the eyes. This team becomes one small embodiment of Jesus.

I've just described team ministry at Lake Edge Lutheran Church. With a team of over 60 elected leaders, our congregation is stronger together than we are when we are separate.

And beyond the elected leadership, we have a community of several hundred members and friends who use their gifts of time and talent to maintain and grow our ministry.

It's not just Pastor Stephen and me and the rest of the staff who use our God-given gifts in service to the congregation – it is all of us.

Each person who is connected with Lake Edge Lutheran Church is invited to offer themselves as a living sacrifice – not to sacrifice themselves so that church work kills them, but to offer life-giving ministry to the body of Christ.

And beyond the walls of Lake Edge, we connect with other groups that are trying to be Jesus' body for the world.

Through partnerships with Christ the Solid Rock and Cristo Rey, through the ELCA, through our neighborhood association and The Road Home – every time we join our efforts with those of another organization, it's like taking Jesus' body to the gym and making it stronger.

Maybe Lake Edge is missing a kidney or a left big toe. Or maybe someone here is functioning as the shoulder, but they really just want to be an earlobe.

When we combine our embodiment of the body of Christ with another group's, each one of us is able to fulfill our role even more effectively!

By participating in the ministry of this congregation, by making friends across demographic lines, by living in community with other people near and far, we are strengthening the body of Christ in the world.

By seeking healing when parts of Christ's body have stopped following God's call, we also strengthen the body.

As faithful followers of Jesus, we offer *our* bodies, our whole selves, as living sacrifices, to be the hands and feet of Christ, as we do the God's work for the sake of the world.

So let's get to it, and work together.

Amen.