

“God’s Web”

I Cor. 12:12-31a

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Paul wrote the letter I Corinthians to a young Christian community located in the city of Corinth, Greece. It was a church in trouble. Paul knew this because he heard from Chloe’s people. Reading between the lines we learn that Chloe must have been a woman of power because she was in charge of others. This dismisses any notion that women were invisible and powerless in the early church. Chloe’s people told Paul that the church in Corinth was in turmoil and conflict.

Most of us have been part of or known of a church in conflict, and it is not a pretty sight. Paul cared deeply for this young congregation and so he writes a letter of encouragement and instruction to get things going again on the right track.

Paul uses the metaphor of the church like the body and this metaphor would have struck a familiar cord with the people in Corinth since body and society comparisons were frequently used in public speeches. They were used by those in power to urge that the social order remain in tact. The city philosophers used the body metaphor to teach that every part of the body must play their function in society even if they happened to be lower on the social ladder.

But Paul uses the metaphor differently; he insists that even those members of the body considered less important were indeed essential to the functioning of the body as a whole. We know this to be true; when we have a head cold, our feet don’t feel like running a marathon. The body is an intricately connected and interwoven whole comprised of individual parts that are both diverse and interdependent. What happens to one part has reverberating effects on the whole.

Though Paul is addressing a particular church, his ideas of diversity and interdependence are so very relevant today. And his teachings have a lot to say not only to the church but also to the whole of creation that is God’s web. More and more we are learning the profound effects on a part of the world because of something happening on the opposite side of the world.

God’s web is dynamic, not static; it is empowered by God’s spirit moving throughout the it. It is fragile and must be handled with care. It reverberates with the breathe of God and with the work of those who seek to be the body of Christ performing tasks that need to be done within God’s web.

It has been a long time since I read the book, *Charlotte’s Web*, so Monday evening I went to see the latest version of the movie. This heartwarming story has many applications for interpreting God’s web of creation. Wilbur is born a runt; he is indeed the least of the litter and considered so inferior that his life is not worth its feed, or so the farmer thinks.

But a little girl named Fern believed otherwise and convinced her father in a rather demanding manner that Wilbur be allowed to live. (Perhaps Fern grew up to be a protester for some issue.) Like Paul’s advice to honor those members of the community considered to be inferior, Fern did everything within her power to help Wilbur thrive. She loved the little pig.

When Wilbur became so large that he had to be moved across the street to Mr. Zuckerman’s barn, he was not at all welcomed in this new social order. The animals didn’t like Wilbur, and they really didn’t like each other very much. The animals argued with each other and were really only interested in their own well-being. This was a barn in trouble. But Wilbur changed all that. He treated each animal with dignity; he appreciated their uniqueness and ignored their faults; and when they wouldn’t be his friend, he made friends with the least liked, most despised animal in the barn, a spider, named Charlotte.

You probably recall the story. Wilbur over hears that he’s probably going to be sacrificed for Christmas dinner, and he begs his best friend, Charlotte, to help him escape certain death. So Charlotte uses her artistry to spin into her web the words “Some Pig” and underneath this web, Wilbur sat. People came far and wide to see this miracle.

When their fascination with this unusual site ceased, Wilbur was again seen as a really good ham for Christmas dinner; so Charlotte spun another word, “Terrific” over the door where Wilbur proudly sat. This again caught the amazement of the county folks and made Mr. Zuckerman a

proud farmer indeed. Finally, it was decided to take Wilbur to the county fair even though it would cost money to enter this underweight and inferior pig. By this time Charlotte was growing old and was very tired, but she gave her all to spin a word that would secure Wilbur's life for a long, long time. She spun the word "Humble" over Wilbur's pen and all the people at the fair viewed Wilbur with awe and amazement.

Sure enough Wilbur won a special award and with it he also won a lifetime on Zuckerman's farm. But for Charlotte life was ending. She created her masterpiece egg sac which held her future offspring, and then much to Wilbur's distress, Charlotte dies. She has put the welfare of Wilbur and her babies above her own life. Charlotte's web became a means of salvation, of life, of a future. And so it is with God's web.

If we listen carefully to Paul's words, we learn with what great care we are to treat each other as intricate parts of the web of San Dimas Community United Church of Christ as well as the web of the larger creation God so loves. The web is not ours to destroy; it's God life giving gift to us. Therefore, we offer ourselves to others in life giving ways.

Now in Mr. Zuckerman's barn those animals who were always vying for top dog were also transformed. Over time they began to care for each other and not to think so highly of themselves. Their happiness began to be dependent on Wilbur's welfare. They learned to not fear the spider but to rejoice when the spider's babies hatched. The diversity of the barn became an interdependent society where both joy and sorrow was shared. The animals no longer just tolerate each other; they care about each other.

In I Cor. Paul put it this way: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with."(12:26)

Life together even in the church is not always neat and tidy. We are sometimes challenged by how different others are; we may not understand everyone; and we may not appreciate the gifts that others put upon us. But even the messiness of life together helps us to grow and become.

Charlotte's Web ends with these words: **Mr. Zuckerman took fine care of Wilbur all the rest of his days, and the pig was often visited by friends and admirers, for nobody ever forgot the year of his triumph and the miracle of the web. Life in the barn was very good-night and day, winter and summer, spring and fall, dull days and bright days. It was the best place to be, thought Wilbur, this warm delicious cellar, with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything.**

In 1993 at the Claremont UCC Butch Henderson preached my ordination sermon and called it: "Joyce's Web" because he knew how important this metaphor was in my thinking about God and the church. He ended that sermon by ordaining me to the web of the church complete "with the garrulous geese, the changing seasons, the heat of the sun, the passage of swallows, the nearness of rats, the sameness of sheep, the love of spiders, the smell of manure, and the glory of everything."

It is to God's glorious web of creation and to the web of church that we find our place to live out our calling and to give ourselves to that which is larger and greater than ourselves. May we, like Wilbur, be adorned with the words: "Some Church," "Terrific," and "Humble." Amen