

We had a very good time in our Confirmation Class last Sunday evening. The theme for the night was **“The Church, The Body of Christ, and Real Membership.”** We learned that technically the word CHURCH never means a building, because it doesn't. The 2 NT words that we translate as “church” actually say “the people called out” and “that which belongs to the Lord.” We learned that according to St. Paul, the Church is to be the Body of Christ, a living group of human beings, who are to function as a whole to do the things that Jesus would be doing if he were currently here, which he is not because technically he has ascended to the right hand of the Father. *We are called to be the Body of Christ in this place.* And then we came to understand that a real member should be a body part that actually does something. A body part needs to do its part to make the whole body live. So the kids were asked about what kind of body part ( metaphorically ) that they would end up being in the living Body of Christ. It was a very good night of learning and formation.

I bring that up with true joy but I want to mention something else today because of the calendar. It used to be, more than 30 years ago when I was a young pastor, that near the end of January, a very special once-per-year Sunday would come along: Ecumenical Sunday! ( notice our slide ) I was tickled that the computer let me put the actual Greek word oikoumene up for us to see. From it comes this word ECUMENICAL. In my mind and heart this is a very good word. The Greek word actually means “the whole wide world.” OK. Why did this ever start? Well, back in 1910, the world was facing a lot of troubles. WW 1 would engage in 1914, there was the rise of right-wing nationalist groups in Europe at that time. And the Church had been divided into many pieces because the Protestants had opened the door for that to happen 400 years earlier. One holy catholic Church ( and the word Catholic just means universal, so don't panic ) meaning all of Christianity had been divided and subdivided, especially in our United States more than anywhere else in the world. Do we realize that? We are the ones

who have 65 different DENOMINATIONS in the yellow pages! 65 different brand names of churches! Many of those churches have claimed that **THEY ALONE** have God's truth. So if you aren't with them, you are doomed.

So just before WW 1 a group of world church leaders met in Scotland. They wanted the churches to get over their differences so that the Church could be unified in the world, for the sake of the world. After WW 2 in 1947 in Amsterdam, World Church leaders met and formed the **WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES**. Our Methodist Church was a part of that from the beginning. But many other American Protestants wanted no part of it. They alone had the truth. Just for the record, many different denominations started to reunite in the 1900's. Canada created the United Church of Canada in the 1920's. Methodists who had been broken apart reunited in 1938 and again in 1968 to become the United Methodist Church. The Congregational Church joined the E & R Church in 1957 to make the United Church of Christ. In the 1980's I know that some Presbyterians came back together, and Lutherans also. So after so much breaking apart, we started to glue ourselves back together. There was hope that it would eventually reconnect as many of us as possible. Let me read a quote from 1986:

**“The ecumenical movement still progresses, moving toward more unity with the Lord on the part of individual churches, which will one day result in more visible unity of the churches in the world.”**

In 1986 there was still a strong movement of wanting to connect with other denominations. In fact we had ministerial associations, of which I was happily a part. I was in one in North Canton in the late 1980's. And each year at the end of January, we would do pulpit exchanges. I went on the road and preached at a Church of the Brethren and Roman Catholic Church. I had that Church of the Brethren pastor, a Catholic priest, and a Rabbi from Canton, all spoke at the church I served! It was great. In the 1990's this was still happening. I did services with Roman Catholic priests

and went to Bible Study with Missouri Synod Lutherans! We did Ash Wednesday in Wellington, Ohio in a Catholic Church with 6 local protestant churches attending. It was great.

Ecumenical Sunday is still technically on the church calendar. It was last Sunday, January 21. I saved it for today, which you are allowed to do. But very sadly, once we traveled past the year 2000, everything changed. September 11 happened. We have been at war ever since. The world has been divided ever since. But something else has kicked in: most American denominations have been afraid of one big thing, and that is survival. Except for the big megachurches with 3,000 or 10,000 people, where you get to enjoy a rock concert from theatre seating while enjoying your Starbucks Coffee, except for those big churches with their big productions, everyone else is declining. The Catholics are declining and cannot find anyone to be their priests. The Southern Baptist Convention has lost 1 million people in recent years. Our United Methodist Church has been declining since 1970. We cannot find any new pastors either. How many will retire in June from our Conference? At least 34 at this moment. How many new ones will come in to take their places? 6 or 7. Things are getting scary. And when people are scared, they are not in the best mood. They are not as ready to look around and try to build bridges with their neighbors. So it is very rare to hear of any Ecumenical interest in these times.

I am hoping that we can change that, at least in our little town. A friendship with Fr. Steve Ziegler at St. Ambrose here in Garrettsville has started. I am hoping that before this year is over we will be doing some things together. I hope that we will also be connecting with Hiram Christian Church. I long for a connection between some churches like we enjoyed back 20 or 30 years ago. We can do it again. The Church still needs to be unified, at least to the point where it does not actively work against itself. Other churches are our sisters and brothers. We are usually divided by accidents of birth. How is that so? Well, for many years, most Scottish descended people are automatically Presbyterians. Why? Because

that is the national church of Scotland! Most Germans are Lutheran or Catholic, although some are also Brethren or Reformed or Mennonite/Amish. Scandinavians are usually Lutheran. Of course in America, where we have 65 denominations listed in the phone book, people will turn up in almost any group!

Is there a moral to the story for today? The same Paul who says in 1 Corinthians 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,” says something else just one chapter before: “For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it.” The Corinth Church is a mess! Paul tells us that 10 verses in to his letter to them! Paul doesn’t want the Church to have divisions. That is certainly the case in our individual congregations, but I think he would stretch it out to refer to all other churches as well. We should never look at other churches as anything other than family that we have not met. They are not our rivals, they are not our enemies. We should pray for them. I always do. Yes, there are special and good things about our particular brand name of church! But we are not the only ones. May God bless us with ecumenical hearts, and take away our fear of the future. We will be what we will be. But we will always be needed to keep carrying God’s light and love to all the people we meet. I’ve said these things in Jesus’s name. AMEN.