

[Untitled] FCC Branford  
Ephesians 4:1-13  
25 October 2015

It is my great joy and honor to join you here today in Branford. I bring you greetings on behalf of the 240 churches of the Connecticut Conference and our Conference Minister Kent Siladi, and especially from the 67 congregations of the South Central Region. In particular I bring you greetings from the First Congregational Church in Middletown, where I preached a couple of weeks ago, and with your permission I will bring greetings from you to the First Church of Christ in Woodbridge where I will be a couple of Sundays from now. I also bring you greetings from Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Des Moines, Iowa, the church of my childhood, where the Rev. Dr. David Ruhe served as Senior Minister for 21 years—Dr. Ruhe, some of you may recall, was once a guitar-toting well-intended Associate Pastor here many moons ago; and at Plymouth he spoke fondly of the people he knew and the lessons he learned here in Branford, so I thank you for the gifts you perhaps unwittingly gave to the wider church, and to me personally, in your shaping of his leadership and service.

Today I am grateful to Pastors Theresa and Susan for inviting me here, and grateful to all of you for welcoming me. And I want to thank you for your faithful financial support of the ministries of the United Church of Christ through your giving to Our Church's Wider Mission Basic Support, the Neighbors in Need Fund, and the One Great Hour of Sharing campaign. Today I also pray for your pastors and their leadership in this time of transition, and for the work of your Deacons as they move forward in the search for a new pastor, and I pray also for that new pastor, whoever he or she or they may be, as God prepares them to serve among you.

*Now, friends, will you pray with me please: may the words of my mouth...*

This weekend, Friday and all day yesterday, your Connecticut Conference—made up of people just like you, maybe your delegates were even there—this weekend your Conference gathered at Newington high school for our annual meeting. We heard a keynote address from our new General Minister and President, John Dorhauer, and another address from our Conference Minister, Kent Siladi, and we worshipped together and ate together and broke into small groups to learn from one another... Our theme centered around the need for leadership development in the church, and we asked the question, "Who, me?" As in, God is calling you to be a leader in the church. "Who, me?"

And when we talk about leadership in the church, we are not just talking about pastors. We are talking about all those who lead in the church, all those who minister in Christ's name—teachers and musicians and Deacons and trustees and office volunteers and gardeners and cookie-bakers and more. All of us are called into the church to share the gifts God has given us to share with the world.

So this weekend we read this passage from Ephesians, and studied it a little together in our small groups. We talked about the ways our churches nurture and equip our leaders—and the ways we sometimes fall short in nurturing and

equipping our leaders. We talked about how we empower, and sometimes disempower, our leaders. We talked about how we celebrate our leaders, and how we burn them out. And we talked about the gifts our leaders bring, and the support they need. We talked about Paul's teaching to the church in Corinth that there are many gifts but only one Spirit, and his teaching to the Ephesians which we just heard, that these many gifts are supposed to be used to serve the body of Christ, the realm of God. But, Paul reminds his churches, we are not all gifted and called to serve in the same way. Some are given to the church as apostles, as prophets, as evangelists, as shepherds, as teachers, all of us gifted in different ways to serve in different ways. If the body of Christ had only hands, we could serve those around us but we couldn't move very far; if the body of Christ had only eyes, we would see so much injustice but not be able to speak about it; if the body of Christ had only ears, we could hear the cries of the suffering but we couldn't respond to help. This would be a useless body, indeed.

But we are not all gifted with the same abilities, thanks be to God! We have one Lord, one faith, one baptism, but different gifts. Many gifts, one Spirit, as the old anthem goes. Paul exhorts his readers to strive to maintain unity in the Spirit: unity, my friends, is not the same thing as uniformity; unity is not the same thing as unanimity.

In the church where I grew up in Iowa, we had a motto. Under David Ruhe's leadership we actually, literally, voted to declare it our motto, and it's printed at the top of every worship bulletin and every publication. And we attribute this motto to a former Senior Minister of the church who led nearly 100 years ago, but we could be wrong about that. The motto is, "We agree to differ; we resolve to love; we unite to serve." Maybe you've heard it before: "We agree to differ; we resolve to love; we unite to serve."

In the church, we are going to encounter times of difference—difference of opinion, difference of perspective, difference of interpretation, difference of ability, difference of understanding. Unity is not uniformity: we will be different. But if we agree that it's okay to differ, then we can establish a culture where it's safe to differ, and where we recognize the richness our difference and diversity creates. We agree to differ.

And we make it okay to differ by resolving to love. No matter what. We love one another, we love Christ's church, we love the challenges of community and we love the rewards of leaning together into those challenges. Unity is not unanimity: We sit together in our brokenness, and we love each other through pain and forgiveness and reconciliation even though we may never experience wholeness in exactly the same way again. In spite of our differences, we resolve to love.

And then we unite to serve. Because all our differences, all our divisions, all our brokenness is not enough to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and Jesus calls us to join together for common purpose, to go and serve the world. Our service is not about what's happening in here, it's about what's happening out there. Our service is not for us, for our brokenness and healing; our service is for the broken world, and its healing. We unite to serve.

We agree to differ, we resolve to love, we unite to serve.

We need one another, and we need one another's gifts. Not so we can all do the same thing, but so that we can all work toward the same goal: the building-up of God's kingdom, the manifestation of God's reign on earth. We forget so easily that this work is not about us; and in our panic over leadership, in our confusion over purpose we forget whose church this is. Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and we need one another because we cannot be the church by ourselves.

You know, the night he was betrayed, the night he was arrested and taken to be executed, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. He had to know he was going to die; he'd just spent that last several hours talking with his disciples, cramming in every last bit of knowledge he wanted them to have; eating a final meal with them and washing their feet, serving them; and then he spent some time alone in the garden, in prayer. And his prayer was not for himself. His prayer was for us: I pray that they may all be one, he said. He did not say, I pray that they would all be the same. I pray that they would all agree: NO. He prayed that we would all be one. Our unity is his goal, his prayer. There are many gifts, but one Spirit. Christ's church is not served, Christ's goal cannot be met, we cannot be true and faithful disciples, if we lose sight of this goal. Let us agree to differ, resolve to love, and unite to serve in Jesus' name.

Thanks be to God. Amen.