

“We Are Connected”
I Corinthians 12:12-27
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 31, 2008

This morning you have heard Pastor Gaines talk about what is happening at the Pearl Community Center. He and Pastor Charlotte Abram have a great passion for the children and youth of the surrounding neighborhood. John C. Johnson and Thelma Sims unselfishly give of their time to make a difference in the lives of those young people. While the TRI-Community congregation has taken the lead in the good work that is going on at the Center, we are called to join with them as well. We answer that call for two reasons. First and foremost, we answer that call because of Jesus’ words. As his parable of the Good Samaritan makes very clear, our neighbors are not just those who live next door to us. This community around 204th and Veterans Drive may be a long way from that community around 24th and Ogden Streets, but we are neighbors just the same. And as Jesus knew very well, we are our brother and sister’s keeper. We are called to help because our neighbors need us.

But that is not all. We also answer that call because we are connected by our common love of Jesus Christ. We are called to join in the ministry happening at Pearl because those at TRI-Community and those at Elkhorn Hills are members of the same Body of Christ. That is a message that the apostle Paul took with him wherever he went. In a time when national, ethnic, and tribal loyalties, not to mention sheer distance, separated everything, Paul made it very clear that the churches in Asia Minor and Southern Europe were intimately connected to the churches in the Middle East. Because of their common faith, they were part of each other, so much so that when the church in Jerusalem was hurting because of a regional drought, Paul gathered relief funds from the churches at Galatia, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Athens, and Rome—perhaps the first time in history that anything like that had ever been done. The people of Christ were connected to each other.

That’s a lesson that our own John Wesley learned well. As the Methodist movement started to spread and people began to catch the same vision that he had caught,

Wesley consolidated that network of like-minded individuals into that which he called “the connection.” The people called Methodist became linked to one another. Down through the years that became an idea very important to folks like us. As a matter of fact, we call our particular—and sometimes peculiar—style of church government “connectionalism.” Unlike “congregationalism,” where each individual congregation is a self-functioning, autonomous unit, United Methodist congregations throughout the world are linked to one another in various ways: through a common tradition and way of doing things, through our Doctrinal Standards and General rules, through the leadership of our bishops and superintendents, and through a common mission. As our own Nebraska bishop, Ann Sherer, likes to say when she refers to our Annual Conference, “We are one church with 350 mission stations around the state.” United Methodists believe they can do more together than they can do apart. We may be different congregations located in different places, but we are the same church. We help because we are connected.

I’ll have to admit, however, that there is another reason that I want to be involved in this ministry. When I drive to Pearl, I pass through an area I know well. My dad used to work at 30th and Ames, in what is now the Bank of the West there on the northeast corner of the intersection. My brother used to play baseball in front of the smokestacks at OPPD Park. I had a good friend that used to live in one of those big houses on Florence Boulevard. Grand Avenue, Saratoga, Brown, Camden, Fort, and Ogden Streets—those are names I know very well, names of streets on which my brother, my sister, my friends, and I would play and never be afraid. Like Pastor Gaines, I want the children and youth of that area to be able to play on those streets again and not be afraid. And I know that government programs will never make that happen. Good jobs that offer a living wage are always helpful, but they are not the solution either. More police on more corners won’t ever stop some troubled soul from grabbing a hunting rifle and taking aim at an innocent victim waiting at a fast food drive-thru. I believe that only the good news of Jesus Christ can make a difference. I believe that the gospel has the power to transform hearts and change lives like nothing else can do. And the thing that both excites and disturbs me is the knowledge that the responsibility for preaching that good news, the charge to share the gospel, has been given to the church.

I am so grateful that Ralph and Charlotte have let us be a part of what they are doing. I am excited to see that so many members of Elkhorn Hills are already involved in one way or another. Ask Gary or Colleen Tuttle or Dan Swanson if they're having a good time tutoring. Ask our United Methodist Men if what they are doing is worthwhile. Great things are happening at the Pearl Community Center. And even greater things can happen when we remember that the love of the One who binds our two congregations together is the greatest agent for change the world has ever known.