

15th January 2023 – More than the sum of our parts

Led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. GATHERING MUSIC Widerstehe doch der Sünde, BWV 54 (Transcr. by Víkingur Ólafsson), by Bach https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGXBudB_reM

2. WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome. Welcome to all of you here in the church and everyone with us online today. You are each welcome here, just as you are.

To continue from last week's theme of finding our centre...some words from Victoria Safford

'All of you is holy'

Forget about enlightenment,

Sit down wherever you are, and listen to the wind that is singing in your veins.

Feel the longing, the fear, the love in your bones.

Open your heart to who you are, right now,

not who you'd like to be,

not the saint you're striving to become,

but the being right here before you, inside you...

All of you is holy.

You're already more and less

Than whatever you can know.

Breathe out,

Look in,

Let go.

This week's theme is 'More than the sum of our parts'. More about that to follow.

But now, as is our custom, let's light our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith and our beloved community. *If you're at home I invite you to light a candle with me now.*

May the single flame we now kindle
Remind us that we are one,
that the struggles and wounds of each of us impact us all.
We grow together. We fail together.
We move forward on the path only by walking side by side.
By giving ourselves to the greater whole, we find ourselves again.
May this morning help us take another step along our way.

Let's sing...

3. FIRST HYMN 158 (P) The flame of truth is kindled

The flame of truth is kindled,
our chalice burning bright;
amongst us moves the Spirit
in whom we take delight.
We worship here in freedom
with conscience unconstrained,
a pilgrim people thankful
for what great souls have gained.

The flame of thought is kindled,
we celebrate the mind;
its search for deepest meaning
that time-bound creeds can't bind.
We celebrate its oneness
with body and with soul,
with universal process,
with God who makes us whole.

The flame of love is kindled,
we open wide our hearts,
that it may burn within us,
fuel us to do our parts.

Community needs building,
a Commonwealth of Earth,
we ask for strength to build it –
a new world come to birth.

Words © Clifford Martin Reed

4. PRAYER [Katie Kandarian-Morris](#)

O God of many names, the personal and mysterious,
We come now to a quiet time, an interior place,
a place for deepening of the spirit, and enrichment of the soul.
We seek to know ourselves by knowing you.

Let us have the courage to sit in unknowing,
the openness to find answers in unexpected places,
the willingness to be authentic with ourselves,
ready to bring our face to the world.

May we be willing to know others by what's genuine in them
By welcoming them into the world,
By appreciating the beauty that comes from seeing wholeness and truth.

Let us sit for a moment in that quiet depth.

May it be so. Blessed be.

*Pause to bring to mind those who are suffering at this time...we pray for comfort, courage
and guidance for the way ahead for all who are lost, suffering, alone.*

5. STORY: The bundle of sticks, Aesop's fable

Once there was a farmer who had a family of sons. The sons were forever quarrelling among themselves. No words the farmer could say did any good, so he cast about in his mind for a striking example that might make his sons see that discord would only lead them to misfortune.

One day, when the quarrelling had been even worse than usual and each of the sons was moping about in a surly manner, he asked one of them to bring him a bundle of sticks. Then he handed the bundle to each of his sons in turn, and told them to try to break it. But although each one tried his best, none of them was able to do so.

The farmer then untied the bundle and gave the sticks to each of his sons to break one by one. This they did very easily.

"My sons," said the farmer, "do you not see how certain it is that if you work together and help each other, it will be impossible for your enemies to injure you? But if you are divided among yourselves, each one of you will be no stronger than a single stick in that bundle."

6. READING 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27

Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are

indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

7. 2nd HYMN 35 (P) Find a stillness

Find a stillness, hold a stillness,
let a stillness carry me.
Find the silence hold the silence,
let the silence carry me.
In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Seek the essence, hold the essence,
let the essence carry me.
Let me flower, help me flower,
watch me flower, carry me.
In the spirit, by the spirit,
with the spirit giving power,
I will find true harmony.

Transylvanian melody, words by Carl Seaburg based on a Transylvanian text © Alan Seaburg

8. REFLECTION: A calm, clear place, Jezibell Anat

Let us come into a calm, clear place
Where we can relinquish our clutter
And relax from busyness into being.

Let us settle into the calm, clear place
Where the earth supports our bodies
And the community lifts our spirits,
Where we can breathe in peace
And centre ourselves in love.

Let us welcome our calm, clear place
Where our hearts can open
And our thoughts can expand
Beyond the cobwebs of convention
Into the creative flow of infinity.

9. SILENCE

10. INTERLUDE 'The river', Coco Love Alcorn

<https://youtu.be/Gq0IbZdbvFo>

11. ADDRESS We are more than the sum of our parts.

It was the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle who apparently said that 'the whole is greater than the sum of the parts'. So not exactly a new idea, but like the best ideas it's worn well.

Of course in maths, the total you get is very much exactly the sum of the parts. If you add 2 + 2 you just get 4. You don't get *more* than 4. Also if you keep adding more and more apples to a pile of apples – well you get a bigger pile of apples, for sure. But it would be hard to argue it was really any more than the sum of all the individual apples in the pile. I find adding items to my to do list quite similar. I simply end up with a longer and longer list.

But Aristotle wasn't talking about maths, or piles of fruit, or endless lists. He was talking about complex systems. Also, like all translations of ancient Greek (including the many versions of the New Testament) they vary considerably in their interpretation and nuance. So some would say that what Aristotle meant was that the whole is not only '*more*' but something '*besides*' the sum of the parts. In other words the whole might be quite different from its parts.

I play in an orchestra where this feels true, and some of you sing in choirs or act in plays for take part in other activities in which I'm sure you have experienced ways in which the whole is more – and besides – the sum of its parts. And the feeling of mutual connection and creation can feel truly exhilarating.

I'd say this church building is a complex system. It's certainly made up of many parts – lots of different components and materials, many of which we try more or less successfully to maintain. There's concrete and steel, limestone and glass, wood and copper and so on. There are walls and floors, windows and doors, ceilings, a spire and a pulpit. But these parts have not just been put in a pile, they've been combined into a whole, with each component playing its necessary part, and the whole – I hope you agree – is not only more than the sum of the parts, but something '*beside*' them too. An entirely new space has been created that has its own beingness, its own character, its own light and acoustics, intimacy, humility and grandeur, even.

In the reading we heard earlier Paul was writing about the early church, not the buildings people might have gathered in, but the people themselves who, as he saw it, together were the body of Christ. And he was making the point that all the different members of the church, and the different communities, each made their own essential contributions to the whole. All of them were indispensable, even if some appeared to be more important than others, he insisted they all played their part. Just as an eye or an ear or a foot in our own bodies play their roles as integral parts of our whole body. And clearly a human body is significantly more than the sum of its parts – and is something beside them too. Last week we were talking about the essence of you, your '*you-ness*', which is unique to you and something considerably more than – and different from – the sum of your body parts, is it not? Likewise, says Paul, the church community is also much more than the sum of all its members, it is no less – in his view – than the body of Christ.

We wouldn't necessarily share Paul's language, but there is something in the principle I think we could agree with. While Unitarians tend to talk not of the body of Christ, we do speak of Beloved Community. And in building Beloved Community we would agree that each person – in their own uniqueness – is an essential part of the whole. We – you and me – we are each part of this community. We each bring our own essential character and gifts and limitations into the mix. But the whole – whether we refer to Beloved Community or perhaps simply as the congregation – is something more besides than the sum of us. It has its own character, its own essence, it elevates us – or has the potential to do so – beyond our own individual selves into something greater.

I wonder – it's worth pausing to consider – what the essential characteristics of this community are? Not what we think they ought to be, or wish they were, but what they actually are, in your experience, right now? If you think the community should be welcoming, well is it? If you think it should be inclusive, is it actually? If you think it should be kind, compassionate, loving, generous and so on...is it? And if not, what is the character of this community. Because just as last week I was urging each of us to be honest with ourselves about our own true values, it's helpful to be realistic about the church's actual strengths and limitations too. Not in order to be judgmental, but to be more aware. Growth springs from awareness, not from denial or delusion.

Of course we can turn up here simply as individuals. In which case, rather like a pile of apples, well – we'll just be a collection of human beings. But being part of a spiritual community, if we are willing to fully engage with it, offers us and the world something more besides – a chance to belong to a Beloved Community that is stronger together, and richer. And, in its diversity, may mirror more strongly the divine itself. It offers us the chance to build something more – and besides - ourselves.

Can we do this, here? The key is to begin by each of us valuing ourselves as we are, then valuing each other person as they are, and then giving ourselves to the greater project of building community, community which can not only liberate us but also offer a shining beacon of light in what is sometimes a dark and confusing world. It's not a simple task – a community is a complex system made up of complex people – but the rewards can be extraordinary.

May it be so.

12. 3rd HYMN: 192 (G) A new community

We would be one as now we join in singing
our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew
to that high cause of greater understanding
of who we are, and what in us is true.

We would be one in building for tomorrow
a greater world that we have known today;
we would be one in searching for that meaning
which binds our hearts and points us on our way.

We would be one in living for each other,
with love and justice strive to make all free;
as one, we pledge ourselves to greater service,
to show the world a new community.

Music by Joseph Barnby, words from Samuel Anthony Wright

13. CLOSING WORDS

Our closing video is about that first stage of belonging just as we are. The singer and songwriter is Namoli Brennet who is herself a transgender woman.

May we dare to live from the center of our being.

May we make our own choices before others' choices make us*

May the fire that burns in our belly, light our way.

And may that personal commitment to our own individual lights, extend to our community so
we may make the world shine anew.

*(*From a quote by Richie Norton)*

15. CLOSING MUSIC

Namoli Brennet – We belong

<https://youtu.be/yAKXi47qPmg>