

3rd After Epiphany
January 23, 1972
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee

"THE CHURCH --A TRANSFORMING COMMUNITY"

On this third Sunday after the Epiphany we read from the eighth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed Him; and behold, a leper came to Him, and remained kneeling before Him. "Lord," he said, "you can cleanse me, if you are willing to do so." Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him. "I am willing," he said, "be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

In the ancient world leprosy was the most terrible of all diseases. No other disease reduced a human being for so many years to such a hideous wreck.

It often began with little nodules soon ulcerated. The ulcers developed a foul discharge; the eyebrows fell out; the eyes became staring; the vocal chords ulcerated, and the breath wheezing. The hands and feet soon ulcerated, and slowly the sufferer became a mass of ulcerated growths.

The average course of this kind of leprosy was nine years, ending in mental decay, coma, and ultimately death. Other forms sometimes took twenty to thirty years to kill their victims.

The physical condition of the leper was terrible; but that was only a part of this problem. For he was treated as if he were, in effect, a dead man. He was banished from human society; the book of Leviticus itself deemed this as law. In the middle ages the priests read the burial service over any man who manifested even the earliest symptoms of leprosy.

In Jesus' time, the leper was barred from Jerusalem and all walled towns. If he so much as put his head into a house, that house became unclean even to the roof beams. Even in an open place it was illegal to greet a leper. No one could come nearer to a leper than six feet--and on windy days, one hundred and fifty feet.

There never has been any disease which has so separated a man from his fellow-men as leprosy.

AND YET, THE LEPER WAS THE MAN WHOM JESUS TOUCHED. In violation of the LAW and GOOD COMMON SENSE, Jesus reached out to a previously UNTOUCHABLE, UNWANTED, and UNLOVED creature of God's creation. That simple yet miraculous gesture was filled with impracticality and risk. And yet, a man desperately sought help--such circumstances demanded that Jesus overlook his own security if he expected to help a sick brother.

Last Sunday Pastor Witt's broadcast eloquently and passionately sought to awaken us to one of the leprosies of our own day. . . sub-human housing. I am sure the cause for this disease lurks with both absentee landlords as well as irresponsible tenants. But pointing the finger of blame alone will not cure the disease. The cure will only come when committed Christians, like Christ, touch the diseased lives of those who are too often forced into this kind of existence.

Unfortunately, Christians today have too often responded to the leprosies of our age much like the religious people of Christ's day responded to their leprosy victims. In other words, we continue to segregate what we feel is sub-human from the main stream of society. We continue to create and perpetuate our leprosy ghettos. We continue to avoid contact with any people who live in these areas. And so it is that not only landlords, or city officials, or tenants, but you and I also are responsible for the decay and rotting of our central city.

Similar to the leper communities of the ancient world, many persons today living in decaying conditions have never seen or felt the simple yet miraculous touch of healing hands. Instead of offering helping hands, Christians too often offer only a slanderous commentary. We hear far too many of our Christian friends saying: They deserve to live in those dumps--they've created them. They don't care about keeping their places clean, so why should I care?

These judgments are often partially true--but they are so near-sighted. They fail to take in consideration that much like a leper surrounded by other lepers, when a man has never known or felt anything but disease, decay or rejection, he doesn't have much motivation or courage or insight into solving his dilemma.

And so like the segregated lepers of Jesus' day, the leprosy of sub-human living continues to thrive because it never experiences a healing touch. It remains segregated from the mainstream of life--both Christians and non-Christians move away from it so that they don't have to deal with it--and as long as such distance and isolated segregation continues, a miraculous cure will never be forthcoming.

But we would be deluding ourselves if we limited the leprosy of our day to sub-human housing alone. For too many of us have shared in the creation of other leprosies. Our hatred of other races creates the leprosy of bigotry and discrimination. Our abandonment of the elderly creates a leprosy for old age. Our exploitation of sex creates a leprosy of the beauty of our sexual nature and needs. Need we even isolate more examples?

Yes, probably one if it isn't already obvious. For each of us suffers to some degree from a kind of leprosy--for each of us has in some way segregated himself from God. We know this to be true because we have not yet offered God's healing touch to the diseased conditions in His world.

Yet we need not continue to decay nor let God's world decay because of our condition. For as Christians we are much like the leper of our gospel story; we have the confidence that God will not leave us to decay and die; we also have the courage and willingness to seek out God's miraculous healing power--

Like the leper of our story, our Christian faith drives us to ask:

"Lord, cleanse us if you are willing to do so."

And we know that as we come to God for forgiving help,

He will respond to our plea by saying:

"I am willing, BE CLEANSED!"

There is miraculous power in that touch from God--in that pardoning gift of forgiveness. For it frees us to feel liberated from yesterdays hatred or bigotry or lack of compassion. It drives us into a new relation with those persons whom we earlier felt were unclean and unacceptable. It compels us to touch the lives of persons who were previously untouchable; and it enables us to see in our touching that we have brought healing power into the lives of those who previously seemed beyond healing.

As we recognize and share that kind of touching power--that kind of Christ-like action in which we are not afraid to get our hands dirty--it is then that we see first hand the miracle of Christ and His love.

As the Church of Christ, we know only too clearly that we are as diseased as anyone that we may point a blaming finger at. But as that same Church, we do not remain conformed to that diseased condition.

For we have felt the touch of Christ's healing power--we know what it means to be healed, to be forgiven when we were in the midst of decay and corruption--and because we have been saved from that death, we are compelled to share that miraculous power with all brothers who are suffering a similar decay, whether it is physical or spiritual.

That is our ministry as the Church--a ministry which transforms the world from its sickness--a ministry which touches the diseased conditions of our society--a ministry which risks itself in order to bring new life to those who are suffering physically or spiritually--a ministry which performs miracles, because it serves people at their most desperate time of need.

The Church is this transforming Body of Christ--seeking always to find the segregated--the lost, the diseased--to find the unwanted, the unloved, the unaccepted person as he cries: "Lord, you can cleanse me, if you are willing to do so". And our response is: "We are willing, Be cleansed." AMEN.

THIRD AFTER EPIPHANY
Lutheran Church of the Master - Troy
January 26, 1975

"WE, THEY, OR US?"

"I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Is Christ divided?" (I Cor. 1:10-13)

While serving on the Function & Structure Committee in the WUM Synod, I first came in contact with the We/They syndrome. We/They meant that the congregations of the synod did not feel in partnership with the Synod. The congregations were the "we;" the Synod was the "They." People often felt that the two could not be referred to as "us." Obviously, this condition created dissension within the synod and congregations.

I believe Paul was describing a similar condition in Corinth. The people were placing primary emphasis upon BELONGING TO A LEADER, rather than to THE BODY OF CHRIST.

"Belonging" is an important part of human existence. Few of us can be "loners." We need to be a part-of -- we need to feel wanted and respected -- we have a basic need to be linked. This motivation is necessary and good -- but belonging can also lead to a form of idolatry.

Paul was illustrating this in his letter. The Corinthian people were emphasizing their belonging to a specific leader. The body of Christ had become secondary - another creature had become primary.

You and I run the risk of the same temptation as members of Christ's church.

How often I've heard prospective members tell me they're looking for a church like good ole Pastor Joe's in Ohio.

Or there's the Missouri Synod battle presently going on -- people caught up in a power struggle between theological moderates and conservatives.. . belonging to one faction or the other.

Or there's the super-market approach to belonging. Here we belong only if a congregation is fully stocked with everything -- a variety of liturgies, plenty of programs, and 37 varieties of canned spiritualism. This is known as a feed-me-type of belonging.

Sometimes, we even belong because of a pastor - in fact, in conversation, we even slip now and then and talk about Pastor Jone's congregation or Pastor Smith's church.

And then too, belonging is sometimes based on emotional climate -- limiting religious experience ONLY to a good feeling --- forgetting that religious belonging embodies work, sacrifice, and extending oneself to meet a neighbor's needs.

Organization - religious principle or ritual acts.
And so Paul had to warn the Corinthian church as he still warns us -- to get the object of our belonging in proper perspective. He says there will be dissension (division) when we make a human personality - or a type of worship - or a certain emotional feeling be the PURPOSE & REASON for our religious identification.

Obviously - this truth applies to all of life, not only the religious community. To OVER-EMPHASIZE any one aspect of life is to open the door to dividing a community. OR - said differently, whenever we look at life with a WE-THEY attitude, rather than an "us" attitude, we are preparing the way for dissension, and often despair.

We all know in marriage - to over-emphasize the "I" or the "you" is to create dissension.

In business - to over-emphasize UNION or management IS TO CREATE DISSENSION.

Among the genders of life - esp. today - to over-emphasize man at the exclusion of woman is to create dissension.

And likewise for the church - to over-emphasize any personality - or any gift of the spirit - or any phase of the church's life or program ---- to do this, is to create dissension.

The church, the world, the individual cannot experience harmony and peace so long as we worship any aspect of the creation, rather than the creator. That means if we worship ourselves - or our ideas - or someone else - or some thing - or an ideology -- or any other created thing -- THERE WILL NOT BE ~~PEACE.~~
UNITY.

I don't think that I need say that our society, our world, and yes, the church, are in need of less dissension AND FAR MORE UNITY.

As Christians, we affirm one unifying force - we affirm one way to unite mankind. Whether it be the church - or marriage - or politics - or business - or family life -- ONLY ONE FORCE CAN REALLY DELIVER HARMONY TO LIFE'S RELATIONSHIPS.

We believe that force is the forgiving, merciful compassion of God in Christ. It is for that reason that WE JOIN and THAT WE BELONG to the Church of the Master, or any other congregation.

WE BELONG because we trust in the unifying power of Christ's love -- we've been offered it, and we know it works.

And so we belong to his body, because we need to be regularly reminded of his power, and we need to be inspired by it. Friends of the Master, we belong to Christ. Let's live ~~accordingly~~
in the unity of his spirit.

Amen

THE CONVERSION OF ST. PAUL (Epiphany III)
Luth Church of the Master
Troy
1-25-76

"TRUE GRIT"

"Everyone will hate you because of me. (But) stand firm, because this is how you will save yourselves." Luke 21:17,19

Can any one of us claim that our faith in Christ has caused people to hate us? I'm certain there have been times; but by and large, our faith has not been a great stumbling block to our secular relationships.

That could be both good or bad, depending upon the blood pressure of our faith. And that's exactly the point of today's text - our focus today is the EKG reading and pulse rate of our piety.

We might call these words from Jesus in Luke the "true grit" of the gospel. Is it any wonder that Jesus only had 12 disciples who were close to him. How many people could possibly be intrigued by the job description he offers.

(QUOTE FROM LUKE HERE)

What a want ad for followers! He says nothing about pay. The only fringe benefit looks like it might be death or imprisonment. There's hardly any need for a pension. And beyond all that - he says, when your face to face with persecution, then I want you to tell the Good News. One thing is certainly clear from Jesus' description of true grit discipleship: there's no mention of winning friends and influencing people or the power of positive thinking.

True discipleship, says Christ, is costly -- it means sacrifice -- it calls for hanging in there when the odds are totally against you.

And so it is that St. Luke in the book of Acts not only tells the story of Ananias, but also St. Stephen. Which one of us doesn't remember Stephen facing the angry mob throwing rocks at him. And in that bloodied position,

Stephen stands firm in the love of Christ and says: "Lord, do not remember this sin against them." That's the firm stance that Jesus calls for as true grit discipleship in today's gospel.

And we all know that the persecutor Saul (now the Apostle Paul) stood by watching Stephen stand firm in love as he received each crushing stone. And then there's Ananias - who is given the task of going to this persecutor to confirm him as a converted Apostle of the very church he sought to destroy.

Ananias confesses: Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to the saints of Jerusalem.... But true discipleship means living Christ's love now, not living in the past. Ananias must face a former enemy of his and the church -- he must stand firm as God's agent of reconciliation.

How often God calls for this firmness from his disciples -- he asks his followers not to be controlled by their sins or anyone else's in the past. But to build upon the foundation of his reconciling love in the present--and for the future.

Yes - that's the true grit of the gospel -- and the only healthy pulse rate for followers of Christ. And yet how often discipleship is based on inferior readings.

For instance, our own constitution shows how sick we can allow ~~discipleship~~ discipleship to become. The revised constitution for congregations of the LCA states that one need only commune or give a contribution once per year to be a member in good standing.

It is sad enough that we have turned discipleship into membership. For we have weakened a faith factor and made it an organizational matter. Obviously, it is better than nothing, but surely we see clearly that once-a-year

discipleship has little correlation to Jesus' admonition to "stand firm."

But even more tragic and diametrically opposed to the true grit nature of faith is the creeping cancer of quitting. Far too much like the secular reality of drop outs today, our Christian faith has too often NOT BEEN a deterrent against "give up" mentality.

Jesus points out how his disciples would face rejection, persecution, family blackmail, and hatred. But he admonishes them to "stand firm" because ultimate victory can only be achieved through his love.

How much the church - and the world - needs to hear this good news today. For so often we choose the cancer of quitting rather than persevere ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ love. How often in the church the least little ripple of hurt or discontent causes confessional Christians to quit.

Whether it be a slight theological difference or possibly not feeling comfortable because there are new families to get to know -- how often rather than facing these realities with the firmness of Christ's love, we run!

Yes - too often we have altered Christ's words "stand firm" into "stand weak and be petty." And how this reality has inflicted our society. So often rather than turning ~~for~~ ^{for} ~~competent~~ ^{help} ~~counselors~~ when facing crises or differences of opinion we simply quit. We give up without reconciling our differences - without sharing the shalom which is essential to all relationships

And the resultant condition is one of guilt, and sometimes despair. So it is that we have a world of people living their lives with all kinds of dangling loose ends -- with unfinished agendas -- harboring all kinds of bitterness and resentments. And OBVIOUSLY - hating with a passion anybody who stands for the love of Christ -- because they have lost touch with that element.

My dear friends in Christ, that is one element of life we can't afford to lose touch with. We must stand firm in God's love through Christ, even when the world hates us for it. We must do it, because ultimately it is the only way of salvation - salvation here meaning from its Greek root, healing.

It will obviously cause us rejection and persecution at times. I am certain that all of us have been laughed at for our conviction in this agnostic age.

But it has been your conviction and mine which has not only enabled us to receive the healing love of Christ, but also to stand firm in sharing it. And 1975 was a year that the people of the Master really began sharing it beyond the confines of this parochial fellowship.

Yes - there have been times when this congregation has teetered and tottered with quitting--feeling that the world around us has rejected and maybe even hated us. But thank God, you have stood firm - AND MUST CONTINUE TO DO SO. Because we have seen the fruits of love this past year when we stand firm.

And I want to conclude this morning by sharing the words of healing and thanksgiving that ALWAYS result when we stand firm in the love of Christ.

(letter) *from Carl Thomas*
LSSM

AMEN

*That is exciting. But
more than exciting. That is
standing firm in the love
of Christ - the true gift
of the gospel.*

EPIPHANY III

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

January 23, 1977

"THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM"

"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to preach the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed, and announce the year when the Lord will save his people."

Luke 4:18-19

She had become known as "Little Annie." She was a young girl locked in a dungeon. It happened a number of years ago in a mental institution outside Boston. Doctors claimed that the dungeon was the only place for those who were hopelessly insane. They saw no hope for Little Annie so they consigned her to this living hell.

Soon after, an elderly nurse was nearing retirement in this place. She was a dreamer--she felt there was hope for all God's children. So she began taking her lunch to the dungeon and eating just outside Little Annie's cage. She felt this might communicate love and hope to this little girl.

Little Annie, of course, had almost become like a wild animal. At times, she would violently attack persons who entered her cage. Other times she would completely ignore them.

When the elderly nurse started visiting, Little Annie simply ignored her presence. Then one day, the elderly nurse brought some brownies to the dungeon and left them outside the cage. Little Annie gave no hint that she knew of them. But they were gone when the nurse returned the next day. So the nurse continued to bring brownies.

Soon thereafter, the doctors noticed a change was taking place. After a period of time, they decided to move Little Annie upstairs. And then the day came when this HOPELESS CASE was

told she could go home.

But Little Annie did not wish to go home. She chose to stay. She chose to stay and help others. And it was this same Little Annie who cared for -- who taught - who nurtured Helen Keller. For Little Annie's name was Anne Sullivan.

And how many times has this story been repeated? Maybe the details are less dramatic -- but the outcome has been the same: FREEDOM FROM A DUNGEON OF HELL ~~HAS BEEN GRANTED~~ because somebody cared. And we all know how important that freedom really is -- because all of us have lived in some kind of prison.

The Bicentennial year has come to an end -- we may not hear a lot of freedom talk again in this nation for another hundred years -- but the QUEST FOR FREEDOM is just as real NOW as it was during all of 1976.

All of our Bicentennial bashes have done little to erase the walls, the prisons, the dungeons, yes - the hells that continue to oppress and deny humanity the freedom that she yearns for.

Many of us - like Little Annie - are still stuck in one kind of a dungeon or another. For many, it's the dungeon of disease. For others it's the prison of perfection, or deception, or indifference. Still for others it's the tight grip of grief or guilt of days already long gone.

For still many more, it's the slavery of self pity, or status, or some other false security. Still others are trapped in the pit of worthlessness or fear of tomorrow. And of course always with us are the dungeons of debts, and violence, and greed, and boredom, and discrimination, etc. etc.

There can be no doubt -- Little Annie was and never would have been in the dungeon alone. Each one of us craves A SOMEBODY WHO WILL CARE ENOUGH

to help us out of our little hell-holes.

And today, there are growing numbers who seem to be imprisoned by a dungeon that doesn't even appear to have bars around it. That dungeon might be called neutrality -- or spectatorism -- or possibly, watchers-of-the-world-passing-by. Many are trapped in this hell-hole and seem to be completely unaware of it.

They are the ones who have no passion for anything -- no commitment for anything -- no motivating purpose -- no zeal for believing in anyone or anything. Unfortunately, their greatest population is among the young - from grade school through college. When asked what really excites them -- what they really believe is basic to life -- they will answer, "I don't know" or possibly "Material security."

These people are plentiful Monsky's depiction of Calvary. This Hungarian artist shows on the one side of the cross the frightened, dedicated little knot of Jesus' followers. On the other side are his sneering, vicious, passionate enemies. These are they, who at least, made a choice.

But on the hill in the background are a host of unidentifiable faces. They neither show hatred or mercy, neither cruelty nor compassion. They are the spectators. They are the neutrals. And they are the most guilty of all.

With some purpose in life, they could have swung one way or the other. But they chose to do nothing. They just weren't interested. They are stuck in the dungeon of indifference -- one of the worst hell-holes of life.

It was never God's purpose in creation to make man indifferent to God or his fellowman -- nor is it God's purpose to leave man there. God does not love us and leave us. He does not tell us that he loves us, and then leave us to rot in whatever hole we're stuck in.

His Word is one which seeks to free us -- not just through words, but through actions.

He sent Jesus in the flesh to show us that love must often be SENT in the flesh in order to free those imprisoned or oppressed. It took the elderly nurse IN THE FLESH to free Little Annie from life in the dungeon.

It takes somebody in the flesh to really communicate the Word of God. Yes, God loves and forgives us. Those words can free us from hell, and they do. But they need to be shared by real people -- they must be taken to the dungeons of other peoples lives.

It's for that reason that we go to places like Oakland County Hospital. Not just because we like to do good deeds. But because God's Word of love and forgiveness must be shared in the flesh.

Yes - God does not leave us after loving us-- he gives us his directions - his purpose - his goal for our discipleship. He gave the same directions, purpose and goal to Jesus. The times have changed, but the job description remains the same.

"The spirit of the Lord is upon you, because he has chosen you to preach the Good News to the poor. He has sent you to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed, and announce the year when the Lord will save his people."

That year is right now! He gives this job description to you and me -- for we are the ones who are making more than a spectator sport out of faith. There are no benchwarmers in the true church -- all of us are called to be on the first string. So - God has called his play here in the huddle -- soon we will leave the huddle to put it into action.

You can begin right now by completing the half sheet in your bulletin. For you and I have been chosen to preach the Good News - now!

AMEN

III SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
1-22-78

"ABOUT FACE"

"From that time Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'" Matt. 4:17

There's much talk - and great popularity today in being BORN AGAIN. All kinds of famous people are getting into the religious limelight by claiming to be BORN AGAIN. Obviously - we all know Jimmy Carter has made this claim -- but he's hardly alone : there's the Charles Manson disciple, Susan Atkins, and Charles Colson from Watergate fame, and Roger Staubach and Craig Morton - the superbowl quarterbacks -- along with Anita Bryant, and Pat Boone, and Marabel Morgan, and a host of other public personalities.

Let's face it -- it's ^{become} ~~more~~ popular today to be BORN AGAIN. But I'm afraid in some ways this religious "fad" is a short-sighted revival for far too many people. All of these people WHO HAVE ALL-OF-A-SUDDEN "got religion" are acting like they've discovered something totally new. And for some of them who have been totally depraved, I'm sure it's new. But being born again is nothing new -- it's as old as John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ.

Each of us has just witnessed Elizabeth Dietrich being BORN AGAIN. That's right - every baptizred person in this room has been born again.

But let's go back to Elizabeth for a moment. She's only a couple of months old -- so how can she know that she has been born again just cause I poured water on her head??

The fact is -- intellectually she still doesn't know that she has been REBORN. But it's not our actions or intellects which determine REBIRTH anyway. It's God's actions FOR US -- he has already acted FOR US in Jesus Christ. Through Christ - we have been cleansed from our sin -- we have been re-united with God. AND ONLY GOD CAN MAKE THAT REUNION POSSIBLE. We don't do it through our intelligence or our purity. GOD HAS DONE IT FOR US -- in Jesus Christ.

In baptism - we simply confirm what God has already DONE

for us! Through his forgiving love in Jesus Christ, he has made it possible for us to TURN AROUND from our own darkness and be made ALL OVER AGAIN. He has enabled us TO DO AN ABOUT FACE.

So even before Elizabeth intellectually knows it -- God has acted on her life SO THAT SHE HAS ALREADY MADE AN ABOUT FACE. She has been BORN AGAIN through water and the power of the Holy Spirit -- she is a BORN AGAIN Christian. And the same can be said for all of us -- God has acted upon all of us who are baptized -- he has enabled us to DO AN ABOUT FACE DAILY.

So why all the hullabaloo about being BORN AGAIN?? Quite simply - because many people don't remain in their TURNED AROUND POSITTON. As they grow up, they often spit in God's face -- they tell God to take a powder break and blow out the light of his love.

We've all known persons who have done this -- they've rebelled against their heavenly father. Charles Colson and Susan Atkins are just two such examples from public life. And for people like this -- it's quite possible that they need a very dramatic BORN AGAIN experience to jolt that back to God.

But for the majority of us -- we have not drifted that far away. Not every Christian needs a jolting BORN AGAIN encounter to get back on the track. For most of us, being BORN AGAIN is just modern lingo for repentance -- which is turning back to God and confessing our sins every day. Baptism is a one-time experience regardless of the denomination -- but rebirth is making contact DAILY with our power source - namely, God!! Living your baptism is doing an ABOUT FACE every day!

We are only baptized once -- but we must be reborn INTO God's forgiving love everydday. That means baptism tells us to turn to God the Father every day and say: God, be merciful to me a sinner. As long as you and I do that -- we need not fret and stew about a DRAMATIC BORN AGAIN experience.

But on the other hand - if we continue to spit in God's face and blow out his light of love -- then quite

literally - only a dramatic experience will sometimes get us back on the track with God. And maybe that's why BEING BORN AGAIN has become so popular these days. Maybe it's due to the fact that people are finally realizing that our world has been blowing their noses at God. Maybe people are finally realizing that our society has been on a jag of amorality and immorality -- we have too often been in a drunken stupor with no commitment to an absolute God or his values.

A watergate could only happen at a time when the society has lost sight of its baptismal promises. In such a society -- everyone becomes his own boss -- he becomes his own lawgiver and judge. A recent Free Press article characterizes the 70's as the era of "SELF-LOVE" -- which really means self-worship.

Anyone who has studied even a little history as I have knows that when a civilization begins to worship itself it is on the road to destruction. And please note -- I am not attacking self-love -- but rather self-worship.

Every sick person (whether physically or emotionally) needs to feel loved and must love himself. In short, he needs self-help. But he seeks self-help so that he can get beyond himself - so that he is no longer stuck upon himself. Yet - the philosophy of the 70's says -- help yourself and the heck with everyone else.

~~and~~ The physician needed today is the same one that stepped into history 2000 yrs ago --- and that physician's advice was: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." That's another way of saying -- TURN AROUND, for help is within reach of everyone who really wants it.

Yes - the first step TO TOTAL HEALTH is repentance -- turning around to God -- facing him squarely -- making an ABOUT FACE and looking directly to him saying: Be merciful to me a sinner.

Dr. Carl Menninger, famous medical sociologist, in his book WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN? says the greatest sickness today is our denial of guilt and the reality of sin. He says Americans are full of guilt BUT WILL BE DAMNED before they'll admit it. So they run to their psychiatrists

and pay \$60 an hour for what they could get in 5 minutes of honest dialog with God. ~~But in the modern American setting goes~~ *you see* -- it's just not popular to believe in sin.

Yes, the times they have changed, but how repetitious they really are. Jesus wasn't popular because he preached "repentance." And we preach the same thing today and it still hasn't become very popular. But nobody ever said that Christianity was a pop religion -- it never has been, and never will be. It always has and always will require EACH OF US TO TAKE AN INVENTORY OF OUR LIVES EVERY DAY. Likewise -- it requires doing AN ABOUT FACE every day! It calls for radical change

of turning to our Father every day seeking His mercy.



you can that
no call ~~to~~ the popular slogan BORN AGAIN or call it the traditional word "repentance" -- they're just different words for the same thing

The important reality is that God continues to offer his help to those who will get down on their knees and ask for it. That's what Elizabeth did today - and God help her to never stop doing it. Yes, that's the life of being baptized with the Holy Spirit. It's not a military life -- but it requires a DAILY ABOUT FACE. And that's the only way that God guarantees that the present darkness CAN TRULY BE TURNED INTO LIGHT.

"Repent -- for the kingdom of heaven is within your reach at this very moment -- that's Good News!"

AMEN

EPIPHANY III
Hope Lutheran Church
January 27, 1980

"SHAPE UP WITH US"

"For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ... If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one body is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it. I Cor 12:14,26-27

The last three weeks have witnessed many analysts and historians trying to lift up the significant trends of the 70's. In no way do I consider myself an expert in these matters -- but from a layman's point of view, I would say one significant trend of the 70's was a RENEWED emphasis upon the human body -- in fact, almost an obsession with the shape of the human body.

It would seem that the 70's have been a decade of physically shaping up. Almost everyone in some way or another has tried to shape up his or her body in some way. I began my "shape up" program in 1972 by buying a Weight Watchers cookbook. A year later I was 30 pounds lighter. And since 1973 -- it's been a gradual 30 pound gain -- so it looks like I must begin anew in the 80's.

Yes when we stop to think about it -- all kinds of emphasis has been given to the shape of the body in the 70's. There has been a phenomenal growth in Weight Reduction Programs -- health spas have sprung up all over. Among a high percentage of Americans -- there is a daily routine of jogging, racket ball, and other conditioning sports. Every week magazines on the newsstands are bombarding us with Farah Fawcett-like figures -- or Arnold Schwarzeneger physiques.

Obviously - there has been more than one trend or message in the 70's. But at least one major message of this decade has been: SHAPE UP AMERICA! Americans have really gotten into shaping up their bodies.

- Tom this AM

The underlying message ~~of this whole shape up~~
~~program~~ is that AS EACH AMERICAN conditions himself
physically -- our whole nation becomes more healthy
and wholesome. ~~To the degree that each member of~~
~~society is in good shape -- to that degree our~~
~~society is in good shape.~~

In today's lesson -- Paul takes this ^{same} very down-
to-earth message and applies it almost unilaterally
to the church. He calls the church - the body of
Christ; he talks about this body being made up of
many parts or members -- and that all of these
parts are equally important. If the body is to
be wholesome, says Paul, each part must contribute
its appropriate function to the whole.

Just advancing from a decade where so much
importance has been given to bodily conditioning --
we should not have any difficulty applying the
same rules of conditioning to the body of Christ.
We all know the hardship caused to our bodies
by a broken, diseased, or flabby member. Well--
that same reality is daily encountered in the body
of Christ.

~~As you might guess~~ * Paul used this body
symbolism because he was aware that all of the
members of the Corinthian church were not pulling
together. There was some foot-dragging in Corinth--
some people who were holding back their loyalty and
commitment. And that was causing the whole church
to suffer. There were some Corinthians who had
a distorted view of Christ's body. And their
distortions were creating divisions and disruptions
to the functioning of the whole church. There
were some members of the Corinthian church who
were boasting of self-importance -- they were
setting themselves apart from the other members.
Well -- Paul knew such conditions could not be
tolerated for the good of the whole body.

We may be living 1900 years later -- but the
conditions for a healthy church body are no

different today than they were then. At no time can the body of Christ tolerate disloyalty, divisiveness, or dilution of its bodily standards, ~~for wholesomeness~~. Whether in the 1st century-- or the 20th -- God's SHAPE UP program is as much needed at Hope Lutheran as it was at the Church of Corinth.

Essentially -- that program is no different from any good body building strategy: 1st -- all members must receive a totally nutritional diet; (2) all members must be involved in a vigorous exercise program; and (3) all members must deepen their observation and concern for *shape* of one another.

To shape up to the body of Christ -- all members must first be fed a nutritional diet. In short, that means being fed on the high energy protein of the church, balanced with rounded out portions of fellowship, fun, and ~~service~~ *education*.

I am told by some experts in the field, that champion weight lifters often eat as many as 250 vitamin pills a day. Obviously, from my point of view, the number is less important than their recognition that they must daily be energized to be strong.

The same applies to the body of Christ. Many members of the Christian body try to survive on sweets alone -- that is, partaking of Christian worship here or there, possibly at Christmas or Easter. Then they wonder why their faith is so weak when they must confront a crisis in life. Obviously -- they are suffering from an insufficient diet of the real protein of God -- his Word and faithful promises.

If the body of Christ is going to be strong -- whether at Hope Lutheran or elsewhere -- then all its members must become committed to a full diet

of the Word -- rather than a superficial taste of an appetizer here or there, ~~thinking that such a response will lead to a strong body.~~

It reminds me of the story of a good friend and parishioner in Milwaukee. He had sent me a check in the mail for a thousand dollars with a note attached: "Dear Pastor, Enclosed are my dues for the year." Fortunately - I could be very honest with this man. So I took his check and wrote the following message across it: "God doesn't want your ~~yearly~~ yearly dues---he wants your heart." *Returned the check.*

You can imagine that led to quite a conversation. You see - God isn't interested in being bought off like he's some kind of yearly dues to the club. He wants us to partake of his total Word. ~~Yours~~ God knows that once he has ~~our~~ *our* hearts-- then our thank offerings will follow. But God is not interested in being bought off ~~like~~ *like* he knows when members of his body are lacking a sufficient diet of his love. *Yearly membership dues,*

Yes - To shape up to Christ's body means committing ourselves to a full diet of Word... and that always leads to a vigorous exercise program. I have never seen it to fail. Whenever a member of Christ's body has been fed a regular diet of God's Word -- that member never withholds his willingness to work -- to exercise his talents for the sake of others ... whether its teaching, or preaching, or giving, or serving, or volunteering, or healing, or whatever.

There is a story told of a little girl who wandered away from her house and was lost in a giant wheat field. The neighbors were members of Christ's body. And so they exercised a search for the whole night. But the little girl could not be found. The temperature soon fell well below the freezing mark.

Just before dawn - the people finally realized what they had to do -- they had to join hands and start across the wheat field in a long line.

And so they began to walk -- hand in hand, joined to a common task. They had not gone far when they found the little girl -- she had become tangled in briars -- had fallen -- and died of exposure.

They picked up her tiny body -- and carried it back to her heartbroken mother. After they explained what had happened -- the mother expressed her gratitude for their hard work. She was grateful that they had exercised their love on her behalf.

But just as she finished thanking them -- she cried out in anguish: "Why couldn't you have joined hands sooner!!"

Yes -- that's the third and equally important dimension of our shaping up to be Christ's body. We need a regular diet of God's Word. We need to exercise his love on behalf of others. But lastly -- to be his body -- we must be unified, joined together in our efforts.

The body of Christ is not a one-member effort. I'm told there are a hundred trillion cells in the human body. Each one is very unique and necessary -- yet all must work together for my body or yours to be healthy. They are all individual cells -- but they are only good when inter-connected and serving one another.

Likewise - the body of Christ. When one member hurts, we all hurt. One member is honored, we all rejoice. But that only happens when each member dedicates himself/herself TO SHAPING UP TOGETHER. We've built a lot of beautiful bodies in the 70's; I pray that we'll make the 80's a time to join hands -- and build up this body of Christ -- *spiritually and physically*. *we have the stamina to enter the 21st century. AMEN.*

EPHIPHANY III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 23, 1983
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"DIFFERENT STROKES FROM DIFFERENT FOLKS"

"To each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good ... (I Cor 12:6) Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (I Cor. 12:1)

In the 60's Pete Seeger said: "Boxes, little boxes, little boxes filled with ticky tacky, little boxes, little boxes, and they all look the same." The reality of our culture has not changed much since the 60's. Sameness still seems to be the goal of our day-to-day lifestyle in society.

We are driven to live in certain kinds of houses because that's the kind of house that everyone else is living in. We buy certain kinds of new cars because our neighbors are buying those brands. We wear certain styles of clothing because current fashion dictates that we must all look alike. Whether its style of hair, the books we read, the music we listen to, or the organizations we belong to -- we are destined to be certain to be the same.

The church has even come aboard this marketing mentality. Successful Church Growth Institutes are now telling church leaders that if you want to succeed -- then be certain that you only seek out members from the same socio-economic class. This perversion of evangelism puts one's political and social viewpoint above the gospel itself. But as the church growth experts say -- it works, and after all, how can you argue with success!?! Success means sameness!!

One San Diego clergyman claims that we are hooked on this sameness syndrome because we suffer from xenophobia -- namely, a fear of what is strange and unfamiliar. It used to describe a fear of foreigners, but today it boils down to a fear of anyone who is different.

For instance - why have many of us been raised with religious prejudices?? Is it because Roman Catholics or Baptists are somehow tainted by fish or revival meetings? No - our reason for religious as well as many other prejudices is the fear of that which is different.

I remember as a teenager how my parents both subtly and directly discouraged my dating of Roman Catholics. God forbid that I should even think about marrying one of those mackerel snappers! But of course I never heard any of those feelings when dating girls without Christian convictions -- for there was nothing to fear. The fear of that which is different. Xenophobia. It has been the way of the world from the beginning ... and still is today.

But God in the person of Jesus Christ came into the world to proclaim a better way! He called that better way KOINONIA-- namely, the fellowship of differences. Koinonia means fellowship, community -- koinonia is community in spite of differences. Koinonia is the community known as the church.

From the beginning the church gathered together all kinds of people. They crossed over social barriers. They snubbed the traditional prejudices of their cultures. They brought together people who were supposed to be enemies. As Paul proclaims in today's lesson: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body -- Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- all were made to drink of one Spirit."

Koinonia. That's the Spirit of the church -- unity in spite of differences. It has been God's goal that one day the whole world will be that way; but it is God's goal RIGHT NOW that his church reflect that Spirit of unity. For that reason - we celebrate tonight a prayer service of Christian unity.

God says through St. Paul -- the church's real strength is through its diversity -- through its different gifts. The church, esp. the local congregation, is very much like a football team. It is very weak if it only relies upon its quarterback -- upon the guy calling out the signals. Like a football squad -- the church must have committed people at all positions -- as teachers, worship leaders, evangelists, callers, planners, laborers, etc. etc. Equally true -- the church must always have reserves ready and waiting to take over when team members suffer injury or exhaustion.

One of the greatest challenges facing this congregation in the 80's is the training and equipping of ADULT MEMBERS for lay ministry. We so often call upon members to be teachers,

and evangelists, and visitors, and cong. leaders, and worship supporters and many times these persons are reluctant to serve merely because they lack confidence and training. We would never expect a running back to carry the ball without extensive training; likewise, the challenge for the church.

Hope Church is a body with an overflowing abundance of God's gifts. Our challenge is to equip one another to use these talents in a Christ-like manner. That process has begun over the past few years with weekly Bible studies and periodic seminars. Again this year that process will continue during the Lenten study on Wednesdays as we seek to better equip one another to apply our faith and ethics to the circumstances of heart attacks, strokes, pre-mature births, organ transplants, and a host of other bio-medical issues of the 80's. But the challenge is more than a 5-week study -- our committees must develop year-round training for members to apply their talents.

Likewise - we are not only challenged to equip ourselves with training -- but even more essential, we are challenged to function like a body, like a team. The players on the Ohio State football team do not belong to Ohio State -- they are Ohio State!! The issue of a football squad is not one of belonging -- it is one of using your individual talents for the good of the whole team.

Likewise, the church. You and I do not belong to Hope Lutheran Church; we are Hope Lutheran Church! We do not belong to the Lutheran Church in America; we are the Lutheran Church in America! The issue of church membership is not the matter of belonging ... but of BEING THE CHURCH. Just As Paul has said with the human body -- the hand is not concerned about belonging to the body -- but is concerned about supporting the other members of the body.

There is a serious problem in this regard in the church today. Far too many people view the church much the way they view other organizations in society. They view the church as one of several memberships -- the church gets lumped together with the rest of society's membership mentality.

Accordingly - if I belong to a golf club -- I expect that club to be there to provide me with certain rights and

privileges. If the club fails me -- then I will understandably transfer my membership to another club. This is all well and good for clubs and organizations in society.

But unfortunately -- the church of Jesus Christ is 180° from that understanding of membership. We do not belong to the church -- we are the church! The church does not exist in order to offer its members certain rights and privileges; it exists not by human sanction but by divine sanction and Christ has made its purpose very clear for its members: NAMELY -- it exists so that members will share the responsibilities and actions of their Lord.

The church does not belong to the people -- it belongs to Christ! It is his body and it lives for his glory and his honor and his unity in the world! It lives by his direction - namely, to serve, rather than to be served! Like the human body - the church has many members, and each and every member is called to offer different strokes for the common good.

Yes - unlike many other clubs and organizations of this world -- the church of Jesus Christ does not have a spectator sport rating -- it exists for the express purpose of active, team membership! It is comprised of teachers and preachers, of listeners and laborers, of lecturers and learners, of lovers and lawyers, of caretakers and creators, of hallelujahs and healers -- the church is DIFFERENT STROKES FROM DIFFERENT FOLKS all seeking to glorify Christ's body (regardless of its denominational tag).

The church celebrates differences and diversity! Unlike the culture which dictates sameness -- the church thrives on a variety of gifts all united to a single purpose: TO BUILD UP THE LOVE OF CHRIST! Where else in the world can we find young and old, rich and poor, black and white, single and married, laborer and manager -- ALL GATHERED AROUND THE SAME SUPPER TABLE!

To each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. One body, many gifts! We did not create these gifts nor do we have the patent on them. They are gifts from God: different strokes from different folks for the common good of our society. Thanks be to God for the multitude of differences in the body of Christ!

AMEN

EPIPHANY III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

January 27, 1985

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

" . . . BUT WHEN I BECAME A MAN . . . "

"For this world in its present form is passing away.
(I Cor. 7:31) [Later parallel text from I Cor. 13:9-11]
For our knowledge is imperfect, and our prophecy is
imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will
pass away. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I
thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I
became a man, I gave up my childish ways." "The time has
come," said Jesus. "The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and
believe the good news!" Mark 1: 15

Do any of you remember a vivid fantasy from your
childhood days? Was there something that you yearned for or
dreamed about regularly? Was there something that almost
prophetically caught your imagination? Did you have a
childish dream about your future?

I remember such a vivid fantasy from my grade school
days. We used to have an old small house in Oshkosh that
had a side porch where all my toys were kept. Amongst those
toys were two or three boxes of building blocks and lincoln
logs. For endless hours -- sometimes an entire afternoon --
I used to sit out on that porch and rearrange the long
narrow blocks so that they would protrude out of the boxes.
I would imagine myself as a jet fighter pilot . . . and
pulling those blocks back and forth, I would be on all kinds
of flying missions -- constantly shooting at the enemy,
always having the fastest jet, just letting my imagination
run free.

In some ways, children today have been cheated by the
electronic games. They are no longer given the opportunity
to let their imaginations do all the creativity. Now they
just sit down behind a joystick and all their fantasies are
played out on the cathoid screen. Nothing is left to the
imagination; it's all played out before them. Only time will
tell which era has been most creative for our children.

Suffice it to say today, that my fantasies of being
the greatest jet pilot fighter never materialized. I never
even made it into the Air Force. That childish world soon
passed away. I soon realized that jet fighting was not the
perfect prophecy for Peter's life. My childish thoughts,
dreams, actions, and speech were not the REAL WORD for my
future life or relationships.

But those fantasies were certainly not the end of my
childish days. As a teenager, I suited up as an aspiring

football player. That fantasy was largely fired by having a good friend who was a super-star at the age of 13. He passed, he ran, he maneuvered, he tackled, he carried the ball -- he just did it all perfectly (or at least I thought so). I thought he was the greatest - the perfect athlete. And I wanted to become like him -- I too wanted to be one of the greatest at Oshkosh High.

Well, that lasted all of one season. I could not run like him ... I could not pass like him ... I could not carry the ball nor tackle like him ... in fact, I couldn't do anything like him. The summarizing reality of my football days occurred one afternoon when I missed a tackle and my coach hollered out onto the field: "Martyn, you couldn't get your way out of a paper bag!" That had a way of quickly bringing my childish fantasies about football to an abrupt halt. No longer did I see football as the ultimate expression of greatness in this world.

In fact, after again watching the Superbowl last Sunday, I really wonder how anyone can think that any athletic game is the ultimate expression for life. Obviously, football's a great sport, a great pasttime, a great source of entertainment and diversion. But after twenty years of college and pro-ball, then what's left for the pros besides separated shoulders, banged-up knees, a broken nose or two, and multiple torn ligaments???

Again, suffice it to say that being the greatest football player is living out a childish dream that will soon pass away with all the other entertaining realities of life. There certainly must be something more perfect, more totally manly than football as the ultimate expression of a man's life.

But even after those disappointing teens, I did not give up my childish ways. After a brief high-school teaching career and four years in seminary, I was ready for the real world of parish ministry. And what did I see during those early days of ministry as the ultimate expression of a pastor's life?? CHILDISH FANTASY #3 - TO BECOME A BISHOP! In fact, in my senior year at seminary, each student was given a final evaluation by three professors. Their task was to offer the student a critical evaluation of his educational output -- and at the same time offer a prophetic forecast of that student's future success in the ministry. One of those professor's wrote on his evaluation: "I really view Peter as possible bishop material in the future." WOW - did that ever swell my childish ego at that moment. Not only did I have the aspiration, but even my trusted professor saw the possibility for me.

Needless to say, after 15 years in parish ministry, I

have come to see so graphically what a childish notion all that bishop stuff was. For nothing is great in being a bishop other than the headaches. Oh, there's worldly status, there's ecclesiastical power, there's prestige and pomp, there's all kinds of worldly prominence in sitting in the bishop's seat. "But all such worldly attributes in their present form will soon pass away." What a childish notion to think that being bishop is the greatest of God's purposes for life!?! How easy it is to make the world's standards of greatness and success and power and prominence THE REAL ESSENCE OF OUR LIVES. But what a delusion!

For as Paul says - "when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. For when I was a child I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I became a man, I gave up my childish ways."

Thanks be to God that I finally gave up my childish notion of becoming a bishop. Being bishop is not the ultimate Word of life for me or anyone else -- that is not what we strive for as God's people or pastors. We strive to do one thing -- to believe in the gospel. Nothing more, nothing less. Whatever comes with that is mere frosting on the cake.

But then about six years ago, when at 37 I figured my childish days were over - I heard through the spiritual grapevine that I was being considered for a Call to Hope Lutheran, Toledo. I heard that it was one of the 15 largest congregations of the 338 in the Ohio Synod. I heard that it was near the University of Toledo -- that it was made up of dynamic leaders, well-educated professionals, aspiring managerial types, very energetic people. I heard it had the potential to become one of the greatest congregations of the Ohio Synod.

WOW - such worldly greatness! Boy, did that news trigger my childhood fantasies all over again. Oh, did I want to talk to those folks in Toledo! Oh, did I want to help Hope become one of the greatest of the LCA! Oh, did I have visions of greatness by the standards of this world! All of a sudden I was again caught up in my childish ways all over again.

How easy it is to succumb to the standards of greatness of this world -- to make those goals and standards the ultimate meaning of our lives. But then Paul reminds us, "this world in its present form is passing away." If we make worldly greatness our greatest goal, then we have never grown beyond our most infantile, childish fantasies. Greatness of size, greatness of power, greatness of prestige, greatness of net worth or GNP -- these are all daily realities of life ... all childish fantasies that we have as adults -- but ALL OF THEM ARE PASSING AWAY AT THIS

VERY MOMENT. THERE IS NO ULTIMATE SECURITY IN THE GREATNESS OF THIS WORLD.

God has a greater idea for all of us. He has said with absolute clarity: "The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the good news! That message is the true sign of greatness -- the true sign of manhood or womanhood. TO REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL is the only true reflection of moving from childish ways to true adulthood.

For what does it mean TO REPENT? It means that we recognize that we are separated from the ultimate truth of life -- partnership with God, and that we are yearning for a greater partnership. It means that we recognize that God's love and forgiveness is far more lasting than any GNP will ever be. It means that we are always seeking to restructure our lives to be more responsive to God's direction than pressured by the powers of prominence in this world. It means that we give no greater priority to anyone or anything than our relationship to God. It means that the accumulation of things and status and money and prestige -- and all other things that are presently passing away -- all these things have become secondary in our lives. THAT'S WHAT REPENTANCE MEANS!

It's like the story of the middle-aged couple who came to their pastor's office perplexed by the behavior of their teen-age children. The wife said: "We've done everything for them. We've both worked hard and saved for them. We've given them everything -- far more than we ever had -- money, cars, stereos, country clubs, college, concerts and entertainment -- everything they've ever wanted. And they turn around and treat us like dirt!" The pastor paused for a moment and then said: "Have you given them God's grace? Do they know of your personal acceptance and commitment; have they experienced your concern and forgiveness? Do they know you care about them more than anything else in the whole world?" There was a long pause, and then the wife responded: "Well, after all pastor, we are pretty busy people, you know."

Too busy with good intentions, but without the partnership of God that makes life full and meaningful. Too busy with childish acquisitions of the things of this world, but devoid of the spiritual support of God's love and compassion. Too busy with the things of this world which are passing away, but not taking any time for the Good News which is the only lasting reality of life.

You and I are not very different from this couple, are we? We too are often caught up in our childish ways. We too are running after success and prestige and power and all the other things of this world that are presently passing away. But we are also here again with God -- in his

protective partnership, being called TO REPENT OF OUR CHILDISH PRIORITIES.

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; but when I became a man I gave up my childish ways." I'm afraid I've not yet become a true man - at least true man of God. I'm in the process of becoming that man ... but I'm still a long way off yet. And I'm afraid the same is true for all of you. That's why each of us so desperately needs the Good News of God. We need to know that even in spite of our childishness -- we are yet forgiven and accepted by a loving God.

I still have my childish fantasies -- no longer jet planes, or football greatness, or being a bishop. But I certainly haven't given up the things of this world. I still have dreams of bigger and better, of greater and greatest. I am still struggling to make those fantasies less important priorities of my life.

In short, there is plenty of room for repentance in my life. But as long as I continue to repent ... as long as I continue to restructure, reorient, and reform my life toward a greater partnership with God -- then I know that I am moving in the right direction. I am finally giving up my childish ways, and becoming the man that God wants me to be. I hope the same is true for each of you!

AMEN

EPIPHANY III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 26, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"KEEPING THE BODY FIT"

"Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. ... 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."

I Corinthians 12:14,26-27

Six years ago, in January, 1980, I speculated sermonically that the 70's would go down in history as the "Shape-Up, Body Fitness" era in America. I was wrong. The fitness programs of the 70's were only appetizers to the full-blown entrees of the 80's. Today, "keeping your body fit" is the religion of almost one of out every two Americans. It is no longer a mere fringe group of morning joggers who are doing it -- today "keeping fit" is the gospel of mainline America. It is the new physical, spiritual, and individual rage of the 80's. If you're not physically shaping up these days -- you're just not with it. Even corporations today must build more than production lines, computer centers, and office complexes in their new buildings. They must also build gymnasiums, work out centers, and swimming pools -- all offered as fringe benefits to their company personnel.

This past week I stopped at Thackery's Book Store to check out the latest in physical fitness. Just in this section alone, you have a choice of more than 154 titles on "keeping your body fit." That selection doesn't begin to name the numerous titles on diets, cooking, medicine, and nutritional fitness. The messiah of the 80's has become physical fitness ... everybody's preaching it from the workout gospel according to Jane Fonda to the muscle-flexing laws of Arnold Schwarzenager. And amazingly -- do you know the greatest fascination of the new books on fitness? MUSCULAR BODY BUILDING FOR WOMEN. It appears that many women are now aspiring to the same macho-mentality they once hated in men -- muscularity, power and strength ... rather than the qualities of gentleness, sensitivity and loving warmth.

My aim is not to depreciate muscular women or any one else attempting to "keep the body fit." I celebrate our society's commitment to physical fitness. For many of us, it's past the time TO SHAPE UP! But there is also a serious dimension of sin in all this fitness mania. It can and often does lead to pure narcissism -- an obsession with self, getting into one's body as the ultimate goal of life, making the essence of existence muscles and miles and more miles, weight-watching and calorie counting.

Today's second lesson has St. Paul exercising our minds to a higher level of the human body -- the body of Christ. Although St. Paul was certainly familiar with the need for physical fitness, there was a higher test for human exercise: KEEPING THE BODY OF CHRIST FIT ... IN GODLY SHAPE ... IN THE SHAPE GOD INTENDED IT TO BE!

Paul capitalized on body symbolism because he was aware that all of the members of the Corinthian church were not pulling together as one body. There was some foot dragging in Corinth -- some members were holding back on their loyalty and commitment. And this was causing the whole body to suffer. There were also Corinthians who had a distorted view of Christ's body. Their distortions were creating divisions and disruptions to the wholeness of the body. There were others who had become puffed up with their own self-importance and piety; they boasted of having better gifts or greater piety than the rest. Paul knew such divisiveness would destroy the fitness of the whole body. So, he proposed a method for keeping Christ's body spiritually fit? Basically -- by following three principles in our relationships to each other *within the body of X.*

First, we recognize and affirm that God has created us intentionally with a diversity of gifts. What does that mean for you and me on January 26, 1986? It means that all of us were not meant to be superbowl football players. Only some are destined to be Chicago Bears or New England Patriots. (But of course, all of us have received the special call to watch the game this afternoon.)

Quite seriously - why would God intentionally create us with such a diversity of gifts and talents? For only one reason: HE WANTED IT CRYSTAL CLEAR THAT NONE OF US IS ABLE TO MAKE IT ALONE IN LIFE; WE CANNOT SURVIVE IN ISOLATION FROM OTHERS! We cannot make it in life without God or without each other. God implements this principle by creating us with a diversity of gifts TO DRAMATICALLY DEMONSTRATE OUR NEED FOR EACH OTHER. We are created to complement one another's gifts, not to compete for each other's gifts. God's view of creation is complementary, not competitive. One becomes a shoemaker to complement our feet -- not to compete with the sandlemaker down the street. The sandlemaker has a different gift, but the same purpose - to complement human feet. The diversity of gifts are given not for competition, but for complementation.

That's why we have a diversity of denominations. Not so that we will compete with one another to glorify Christ or get more sheep. But so that we will complement one another -- some aspiring to this fold, others aspiring to another fold ... all glorifying Christ. Diversity for the

the sake of unity. Father Raymond Brown, a leading Roman Catholic theologian today, celebrates this notion of diversity as he says: "In the rise of the various denominations, each denomination helped bring back some of Christ's light that had gone dim prior to the Reformation." None of us has all the light of Christ, but as we complement one another with our diversity of expression -- we bring out the fulness of Christ's light.

But God not only created us to affirm our diversity within the body. He also commanded that we see such diverse parts as equal. No gift given would become more important than any other gift given. The hand would not say, "I am more important than the leg." The eye would not say, "I am more important than the ear." The heart would not tell the other organs: "You are nothing without me." Each part has an integral importance for the good of the whole. That's why King Wenceslas is called "good" in today's choir anthem -- because he used the gift of his wealth to benefit the poor.

Maybe there is no better way to demonstrate this concept than to relate it to this hour of worship. How would we celebrate without lights and heat and other forms of custodial care? Where would I be without the gifts of scholars, commentators and seminary professors? How could we worship coherently without the gifts of printers, editors, secretaries, historians, hymnologists, musicians, liturgists, etc? Where would we sit without pew makers? How could Christ be symbolized without craftsmen who make candles, altars, crosses, baptismal fonts, stained-glass windows, and vestments? What kind of worship order would we have without ushers, acolytes, greeters, altar guild workers, counters, lay readers, choirs, organists, etc. How would Christ's body (the church) survive without your constant presence, and gifts, and compassion, and love, and commitment? Not one of these gifts is more important than another. But as these gifts are celebrated and offered with mutual commitment, we keep the body fit and healthy!

Lastly, and possibly most importantly, the diversity of gifts and their equal offering has but one purpose: TO CELEBRATE AND UNDERGIRD THE UNITY OF THE BODY. Each gift by itself is but a weak expression if not supporting all the other gifts. Possibly, no better illustration reflects this power of unity than one of Aesop's fables.

An old man had several sons who would quarrel with each other despite anything that he could do to stop them. So, one day, he ordered a bundle of sticks brought to him; then he called his sons and asked each one "to break the bundle of sticks." They each tried but were unsuccessful. The sticks were so closely bound together that it was

impossible for anyone to break them. Then the father had the bundle untied, and gave each son a single stick which could be easily broken.

"Now my sons," said the old man, "you see the strength of unity. When you stand firmly together, no one can harm you. But when you separate yourselves and quarrel among yourselves and make your own gifts more important than your brothers, then you become easy prey for your enemies ... who can divide you and conquer you BECAUSE YOU'VE DEPRIVED YOURSELVES OF YOUR STRENGTH OF UNITY.

As individuals we are weak. As a single congregation, we are still weak. Even as a denomination, we are but one organ of Christ's body. But bonded in mission with the diversity of all Christians, we are an eternal witness to the strength and fulness of Christ himself.

We dare never see the body of Christ in any other way. For too often we respond too late to this principle of unity. Too often we're like the group that responded to the little girl who wandered away from home and got lost in a massive wheat field. The neighbors - being good Christians - exercised a search into the evening hours. But the girl could not be found. As the evening progressed, the temperature dropped well below the freezing mark.

Just before dawn, the search party realized what they had to do -- they had to join hands and start across the wheat field as a unified line. And so they began to walk -- hand in hand, body next to body, men and women, old and young, rich and poor, joined together with one common goal: SAVE THE LITTLE GIRL. Within an hour, they found the little girl. She had become entangled in briars - had fallen - and was now dead from over-exposure.

They picked up her tiny body and carried it back to her heart-broken mother. As she sat grieving, she expressed her gratitude for their common effort of love on her behalf. And then as she mouthed the last words of gratitude, she stood up and cried out in anguish: "WHY COULDN'T YOU HAVE JOINED HANDS SOONER?!?"

That's God's greatest challenge to us, his body, the church. Don't wait until it's too late to join hands and bond together for the common good. When will we see that vision of Christ -- that he has created us with a diversity of gifts NOT SO THAT WE FEEL RICH AND PRIVILEGED, BUT SO THAT WE WILL USE OUR GIFTS TO BENEFIT OTHERS. When will we really become as fit as the body of Christ as we are physically fit as individuals?

Is it any wonder that Paul concludes this whole section of Corinthians challenging the body of Christ to its highest call for fitness. He says: "Now that you are one body, earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I'll show you a more excellent way. For if I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love ... I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." That's the highest gift ... the greatest challenge ... the ultimate fitness program for the body of Christ: TO NOT MERELY TALK ABOUT, BUT EXERCISE THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST IN EVERY RELATIONSHIP IN THIS WORLD.

With that kind of body fitness, there will be great health and well-being among all peoples of the world.

AMEN.

EPIPHANY III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 24, 1988
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"ANOTHER FISHY STORY?"

(2:10) And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. ... And Jonah said, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least. ... When God saw what they had done, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it."

Jonah 2:10 -3:1, 5,10

Many of you have heard the famous Sunday School story of the little boy who was asked what he had learned from the story of Jonah and the whale. He answered: "People make whales sick!" For some adults, the message hasn't changed much: People make whales sick. Is that about all we can say for this ancient story? Is this just ANOTHER FISHY STORY from the Bible? Is it just one of those strange, incredible, unnatural, scientifically impossible fishy stories -- the story of a man swallowed by a big fish and then regurgitated alive? Believe it or not, many 20th Century Christians actually believe that God's intent was for a literal interpretation of this story. In missing the metaphor, these Christians have totally LOST THE LOFTY VISION OF GOD'S CALL AND CHARACTER!

Let's briefly recall the story (it's only 4 chapters). God calls Jonah to preach to the Ninevites - that group of idolatrous, Assyrians. Why the Ninevites? Because God was illustrating through Jonah's call that his message of love was universal not nationalistic -- not merely for Israel. But Jonah, being a bigot par excellence, wanted no part of any foreign mission. Like anyone called to God's lofty purposes on strange turf, Jonah responded as you and I might: HE RAN AS FAST AS HE COULD THE OTHER WAY! He hopped a boat that was headed the opposite direction!

But the boat encountered horrendous seas. Eventually, when the crew learned of Jonah's identity as a prophet, they blamed him for the horrible seas. And Jonah reluctantly concedes, "Go ahead, throw me overboard, and then God will quiet the turbulence." So the crew threw him overboard. And God, like the trusted father that he is, rescued Jonah by a big fish. This same great fish gives Jonah a cruise back to the shores of Nineveh. There, Jonah is regurgitated in all his prophetic glory. The theological point is obvious: GOD SEEKS TO RESCUE US IN ORDER THAT HE MIGHT AGAIN USE US FOR HIS MISSION. This time Jonah responds. He cries out to Nineveh: "You will be overthrown in 40 days!"

To God's and Jonah's surprise, the Ninevite's repent. And God spares Nineveh from being overthrown.

Is Jonah grateful for this situation? Quite to the contrary -- he is deeply outraged and embarrassed. He had told the people of Nineveh that "God was going to get them." Now God HAD CHANGED HIS MIND! Jonah feels totally humiliated ... after all, he didn't like those nasty Ninevites in the first place ... and now God has made him look like the fool. He says, "I knew it ... I knew you were that kind of God ... I knew you were the kind of God who would change your mind!" In anger, he heads for the hillside to mope and hope to die.

One theologian in his reflections on this text makes a major issue of GOD CHANGING HIS MIND! Instead of calling this narrative just ANOTHER FISHY STORY, this leader says THE STORY OF JONAH SHOWS THAT GOD CAN CHANGE HIS MIND! I was really intrigued by this theologian's idea. I've rarely thought about the fact that God should have the perogative to change his mind.

How about you? Do you believe that God changes his mind? Do you believe that God should have this perogative? Well, Scripture makes it clear -- GOD DOES CHANGE HIS MIND! You all remember the great father of faith, Abraham, arguing with God about the people of Sodom. God said he would destroy that city because of her wickedness. But Abraham succeeded in changing God's mind ... he got a pledge from God that the city would not be destroyed if just ten righteous people were found. Unfortunately, ten righteous could not be found ... but at least Abraham had swayed God's mind.

Or the story Saul, Samuel, and David. God had chosen Saul to be the first king of Israel. But soon God realized Saul was not worthy. So God changed his mind and had Samuel the prophet anoint David to be the new king.

So what do we do with a God who periodically changes his mind?? Well, some people make this the whole aim of their faith, their religion, and their life: THEY SPEND THEIR LIVES TRYING TO CHANGE GOD'S MIND. The ascetics and monastics in the first century devoted their lives to prayer ... hoping such piety would change God's mind. But the question is: DOES PRAYING CHANGE GOD'S MIND ... IS THAT THE REASON FOR OUR PRAYERS ... TRYING TO MANIPULATE GOD TO OUR WAY OF THINKING?

It reminds me of the story of the little 5-yr-old daughter who told her daddy she really wanted a baby brother. Her dad thought for a moment and then said, "I'll tell you what. If every night for two months you pray for a baby brother, I'll guarantee you that God will give us one!" That night the little girl got down on her knees and began her vigil for a baby brother. She did this for two solid weeks!

But obviously, Dad knew the long-term commitment of a child. About the 22nd day, the little girl was getting weary ... and she quit praying for a baby brother. The next month went by and mother went to the hospital. When she came home - her parents called her into the bedroom. With one quick swoop, dad pulled back the blanket and there they were -- two baby brothers, not one, but twins! Daddy looked down and said to her, "Now aren't you glad you prayed." The little girl hesitated, and then looked up and quickly said, "Boy, am I glad I quit praying when I did, Dad!"

Although God surely changes his mind -- the purpose for our prayer and worship is not to manipulate God into getting our way!! Throughout history -- and still today among many well-meaning Christians -- there are religious movements that pride themselves on "changing God's mind." DO THIS GOOD WORK ... PRAY THIS WAY ... LIVE THIS SPIRITED LIFE ... and God will bless you with the abundant life. Well, the facts are God has already blessed us with the abundant life ... we don't have to change his mind on that matter.

The point of the story of Jonah ... or any other account that is more than a FISHY STORY ... is not that we need to change God's mind, but that we need to let God change our minds! God's purpose was never to destroy Nineveh in the first place. As St. John so graphically says in John 3:17: "For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn anyone, but that the world might be saved through him." God had no desire to destroy Nineveh. But if Nineveh continued to live her greedy, immoral, idolatrous, selfish life -- then she would be overthrown. Not because God desired it, but because Nineveh would cause it by her own disobedience, her own faithlessness, her own wickedness! God had merely called Jonah for a very lofty purpose -- to go and remind Nineveh of the outcome of her disobedience--the result of her sinfulness!

It's like the story of Mithridates, the king of Pontus and a great man of letters a century before Christ. Knowing that he was a powerful man ... and knowing that there were always antagonists who would desire to kill him by poisoning him (a favored method of assassination) -- Mithridates slowly but surely took poison in small amounts until his body had become immune to large amounts. However, late in his life, when he was full of despair, he decided to commit suicide. But he couldn't do it -- no poison in any amount would kill him. So he had to order his slave to stab him to death!

Sin is like that. After a while it becomes so much a part of our lives that we grow numb to it. We can no longer differentiate between the life of sin and the way of salvation! Only one action brings us back: REPENTANCE! Willingly turning back to the forgiving love and righteousness of Christ!

It is not God who needs to change his mind -- he has always been faithful and loving toward us. It is us who need to change our minds. "We have found the enemy, and the enemy is us!" Only when Jonah was backed up to the wall of the whale ... only when he realized he had no other options ... only then did he fulfill God's call. Only when Nineveh was backed up to the wall of her own sinfulness ... only when she realized she had no other options ... only then did she respond to God's call. Sometimes that's the only way God's people will respond faithfully -- THEY HAVE TO BE BACKED UP TO THE WALL! Is it any wonder that God backed us up to the wall with our 1987 budget: HE SAID, START RESPONDING FAITHFULLY, OR BE PREPARED TO DIE! For to lose the thrust of God's way and God's life is to die ... even though we may still look like we're living!

That's the message of Jonah. It's not just ANOTHER FISHY STORY, but rather a very important message for a modern society: NOW IS THE TIME TO BRING OUR LIVES INTO HARMONY WITH THE LOVE AND PURPOSE OF GOD.

The New Testament people were not much better than Jonah and the Old Testament people. Jesus came with the same message: "Repent and believe." "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." But like Jonah, not too many took Jesus seriously -- they walked or ran away from the call. The same is often true today. Oh, in name we are very faithful. We take very seriously certain traditions of our faith. We bring our children faithfully for Holy Baptism. But then do we expect any change of life from these children or ourselves? Has Holy Baptism made any real difference in our lives this past week? As we learned this past week from a Baptist leader: "the Baptists are not at all convinced that anything happens through Infant Baptism ... because they don't see that it makes any difference in the lives of the families who practice it!" Much like Jonah and Nineveh, we have to be backed up against a wall before we really become faithful!

Jesus Christ came to change the minds and the lives of his followers -- not just to sprinkle them with holy water. But like Jonah - nothing really happened to people until Jesus himself was backed up to the wall ... the wall of crucifixion. Not until Jesus shed his own blood did an unbelieving world finally say, "This man most certainly was the Messiah."

Is that the only way that we will ever become more faithful -- more willing to take God's love into foreign terf -- by being backed up to the wall?? The story of Jonah is not just ANOTHER FISHY STORY. It is the story of God's unchanging love for us. It is the story of our God who never gives up on us ... even when we continue to run away when he calls. It is one of a multitude of biblical stories where God says: "Hey Jonah, Hey Peter, Hey Christian - you need to change. You need to commit your life to the loving purposes of God."

And what did Jonah do with God's forgiving love for the Ninevites? Thomas Carlyle says, "Jonah stalked to his shaded seat and waited for God to change his mind again - to come around to his way of thinking. But God is still waiting for a host of Jonah's to come around to His way of loving."

Be assured, God hasn't changed his mind about us. He doesn't give us FISHY STORIES. He gives us the absolute assurance of his forgiving love. And now he's just waiting for all his baptized Christians to come around to his way of thinking and loving! I hope that's why you're here today: YOU'RE HERE ... BECAUSE YOU'VE CHANGED YOUR MIND ... YOU'VE COME AROUND TO HIS WAY OF THINKING AND LOVING!

AMEN.

EPIPHANY III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 22, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"WHAT A BODY!"

(PRAYER: Gracious Father, on this Super Sunday we esp. give thanks for the superbly abundant blessings you have given to this body of Christ, Hope Lutheran Church. The balance sheets are in ... and again we are a body powerfully blessed. Yes, you have blessed us with great power and economic potential; enable us always to use this power and potential to help others. For you have given us this power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show or name for ourselves in this world. There is but one use for our bodily economic power: it is to serve people. Help us remember, Lord. AMEN.)

"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. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." I Corinth. 12:12;27

Several years ago, TV host Merv Griffin had invited a contingent of body builders to his show. As the dialog was moving along, Merv asked one of the really, big muscle-bound guests this memorable question: "Tell me, son, what do you really use all those muscles for?"

The body-builder stood up, took center stage, and flexed his muscles for the audience. That was his answer.

Merv said, "NO, Im afraid you misunderstood my question: I asked, what do you really use all those muscles for?" Again, the guy stood up and said, "I'll show you." And he flexed again, offering a different muscle-bound pose. Merv quickly jumped in, "No, No, you're still missing my point. I'm just asking, what do you really use all those muscles for?" And for the third time, the body-builder flexed a muscular pose.

The body builder didn't get the point! All those muscles, all that strength -- but no real use for it OTHER THAN SELF-DISPLAY!!

Body-building has become quite a fad for many folks today; many women are even getting into the act. Certainly there's some bodily benefits for today's emphasis upon physical fitness and body-building. But what's the ultimate reason for building up the body? Too often, like the men on Merv Griffin's show, the major motivation is JUST FOR DISPLAY!

No motivation could be more contrary to the will of God. Even President Bush's inaugural prayer took serious issue with the notion today of using bodily power and strength simply for self-aggrandizement and display. I was really moved when the President prayed: "Make us strong to do your work ... but use

(such) power to help people. For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, not to make a great show or name in the world. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people." George Bush possibly didn't realize what a master theologian he was in giving that summary for body-building. Obviously, in using the word "body" today our thoughts are moved beyond mere physical physique. Although many of us may have been enthralled with the "10 of Bo Derek; and this afternoon many more of us will be intimidated by the 22 bodies crunching each other on the Superbowl turf ... today's body talk goes beyond physical attributes.

The body that St. Paul is specifically uplifting today is the church, the body of Christ. On Friday, George Bush alluded to another body like the church, the body politic, the country or nation. (And in case you haven't already noticed, I felt Bush's inaugural was the best I had heard since JFK.) He quoted a saint as his governing guide: "In crucial things, unity; in important things, diversity; in all things, generosity!" Obviously, that quote not only applies to the body politic, but it most dramatically uplifts the mission of the body of Christ (esp. as reflected in today's text).

"In crucial things, unity." What is the most crucial expression of the church? What is the one reality the unifies this body? In fact, how is this body so often very different from the body politic? George Bush couldn't have answered the question any better: "THE BODY OF CHRIST SERVES PEOPLE!" The single word, the most graphic term, the most majestic expression of the body of Christ is capsulated in one term: MINISTRY! From the Greek term "diakonia," this one word spells out the unity of the body of Christ -- TO SERVE OTHERS. That is the strength of this body at Secor and Bancroft Roads -- our mission has one and only one unifying purpose, we have been given one crucial power from God - TO DO MINISTRY. Let that word never be a dirty word for any person who calls himself/herself a faithful Christian in the body of Christ.

When people pass by Hope Church, I sincerely hope they say, "WOW! What A Body!" But how tragic if when they say that - they are really saying, "What a beautiful church building!" Because then they have done exactly what the body builders did on Merv Griffin's show: THEY ARE TURNING THE BODY OF CHRIST INTO AN OBJECT OF DISPLAY! And God deliver us from ever flexing our body or our buildings for self-display. The body of Christ never stands admiring its muscles in front of the mirror. That's classic self-righteousness. In fact, the body of Christ never has time to stand in front of a mirror because God is always calling it to respond to the special needs and hurts beyond the safety of its sanctuary.

That's why Hope Church has gotten involved with Rose of the Desert and St. Paul's Community Center and the multitude of other ministries you will see reflected in today's budget

summary. Because that's what ministry is -- responding to the needs of mission wherever they may be. One member of this body recently indicated he was leaving Hope "because our ministry has gone too far beyond Toledo, namely to Hesperia, California." Imagine if Jesus' disciples had said to him, "Jesus - get out of Galilee, our ministry is only to Jerusalem." Thank God -- somebody from Jerusalem over the years passed the word to somebody in Toledo that there was a need for ministry at Secor and Bancroft.

Yes, "in crucial things, unity." God has given one gift to every single Christian here today - the gift of ministry. To be a Christian is to be forever committed to "serving people" - doing ministry, wherever that need may be. WHAT A BODY this can be when we are unified IN MINISTRY!!

But the body of Christ not only reflects this unifying power (Spirit). Again I quote Bush (and by the end of this sermon you'll think I'm vying to be his PR manager) - "In important things, diversity." The body of Christ not only has strength in its unifying gift of ministry, but it gains strength in the diversity of gifts that are shared by its many individual members.

There's a story told of a little girl sitting on the steps of a massive cathedral in our nation's capitol. A man, passing by, paused for a moment to admire this architectural masterpiece. As he was admiring the building, the little girl said, "Well, do you like it??" He answered, "Oh yes, I think it's one of the most beautiful in Washington."

"Well, I'm glad you like it," she said, "because I helped to build it." The man smiled affectionately and said, "You're pretty small to have had a major part in the construction of such a huge cathedral. Tell me, what did you do??" The little girl proudly perked up and said, "My daddy is a bricklayer. And every day that he worked on this church, I brought him his lunch."

"In important things, diversity." This little girl's job may not have been the greatest in the world's eyes, but it was very important to her and her dad. People need to eat to have strength to work and she had helped supply the food. Is it any wonder that Jesus asked us to be childlike in our faith??

God has blessed each of us with some special gift that we can use to help strengthen his body. Too often, we only think that God's body needs the great gifts -- the several thousand dollar estate, the Sunday morning dynamic speaker, the talented Council leader, the extraverted evangelist, etc. Again, I cannot resist using George Bush for further inspiration. One of his strong themes in Friday's inaugural was reconciliation -- that every body, whether religious, politic, or whatever needs more "offered hands." Every body, and esp. this one at Hope Church needs more "hands on" people!

That's a special gift that many in this body possess -- the ability to offer a helping hand to others. For some of you, it can be a hand of friendship in worship. Look around you -- who needs a hand of friendship? Some of you have warm and supportive hands for the afflicted in our society -- how about holding the hands of someone afflicted with illness or distress? Some of you are good huggers -- how about using your hands to hug the brokenhearted or separated?? Some of you can use your hands to free people imprisoned by guilt or despair -- reach out and touch someone with the freedom of forgiveness and reconciliation. Just using this one part of the body - imagine the great diversity that God has given us for bringing harmony and wholeness to our world.

The importance of diversity reminds me of the story of the surgeon, the engineer and the politician. They were arguing about which of their professions were the oldest. The surgeon spoke up: Well, Eve was made from Adam's rib, and since that was a surgical procedure - mine is the oldest."

"Yes," countered the engineer, "but before that, order was created out of chaos - and that most certainly was an engineering job."

"Ah ha!" said the politician, "And just WHO do you think created all the chaos?!?"

God's intention for diversity is to insure harmony rather than chaos for his body. When one member of the body suffers, other members come to the aid of that suffering member TO RESTORE HARMONY. When one member is honored for her special gifts, all members rejoice BECAUSE GREATER HARMONY HAS BEEN ASSURED. Much as MINISTRY is our uniting gift, diversity seeks to assure lasting harmony amidst the body. No one gift is viewed as more important than others -- all gifts are essential to the harmony of the body.

Lastly then - "in all things, generosity." As we established at the outset today - the body's purpose is never merely self-display. The body of Christ is always more than its individual possessions or parts. The body is energized not by its parts or its muscles, but by the heart of God. Or stated more biblically - the body cannot serve both mammon (its material self or muscle) and God.

The body of Christ reflects generosity because it serves God, not itself. God's generosity is the energizing power of this body. And God always leaves his children with a different understanding of generosity than a bigger car, a bigger house, a bigger church, or a bigger bank account. God's generosity leads his children to be loyal friends, loving parents, and committed Christians who will leave their homes, their communities, their churches, and their country BETTER THAN THEY FOUND THEM. That's Godly generosity -- always leaving the body better than you found it.

Is there any doubt why someone would pass by Hope Church and exclaim, "WOW!! WHAT A BODY!" For where else in this world can you find a body of people UNITED TO SERVING OTHERS, DIVERSELY COMMITTED TO HARMONY, AND UNANIMOUSLY GIVING OF THEMSELVES WITH GODLY GENEROSITY!! What a Body God has given us!! Let's always use it for more than self-display!!

AMEN.

EPIPHANY III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 21, 1990
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE ONE AND ONLY . . . "

For Christ did not send me (merely) to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. I Cor.1:17

As Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." Matthew 4:18-19

Well, it's been a week of regrouping and "coming down" after the tremendous outpouring of enthusiasm for Mike Yaconelli last Sunday. Never have I heard more people respond more positively to a guest preacher/speaker at Hope. What a thrill for all of us who were a part of the experience. Of course, I must admit - I was a little intimidated to get back into the pulpit after 29 minutes of Yaconelli. I always thought I brought some passion to my preaching ... and then there was this 47-yr old Italian! Wow! Now that was passion ... and without sweat, too! I can almost imagine what the kids are saying this morning ... back to the 47-yr old German ... the old father figure of Hope Lutheran! "BORING!!"

Well, Mike Yaconelli, wherever you are - I just want to remind you what I said to you last week - YOU'VE GOT IT MADE! I wish I could preach the same sermon 52 weeks a year to different youth groups and congregations! Maybe that would give me a little more Italian passion -- it would certainly make preaching a lot easier.

Of course, for those who missed Mike - the biggest laugh last week was about the bushy tailed creature in the children's message. The little boy said, "Well, it sounds like a squirrel to me, but I'm sure you want me to say it's Jesus." Well, since Mike gets to tell his favorite Children's Message story -- I must begin with my own this week. Mine is about an Associate Pastor who returns to an Anniversary at his former congregation after being away 15 years. This Associate was fondly remembered for his Children's Messages.

Thinking that all the children had never seen him before, he asked: "How many of you have ever seen me before?" One little girl immediately raised her hand. The pastor was totally shocked. He didn't know her from Eve. So he asked, "Really, do you really know me?" She responded, "Oh yes, I've seen you hundreds of times."

He couldn't believe it! She was only 5 or 6 years old. He had been gone for 15 years. He finally said, "Little girl, you must have me confused. I bet you think I'm Jesus or one of his disciples." She perked right back: "Oh no! I know exactly who you are. I've seen you hundreds of times!"

By this time the whole congregation was curious. The pastor should have stopped while he was ahead - but you all know pastors ... we're gluttons for sacrifice & punishment. So he said: "O.K. honey, since you know me so well, come here and take the microphone and tell the whole congregation where you have seen me." She popped right up, took the mic, and in a booming voice said: "I've seen this pastor hundreds of times in my mommy's bedroom."

The pastor and congregation were mortified. As he was trying to recover, pastor noticed the little girl's nametag. Sure enough - some 16 years earlier he had officiated for her parents' wedding. And on the bedroom bureau ever since that day stood the wedding picture of mom, dad, and this pastor.

I'm sure you're all wondering how I'm going to tie this one into today's text. Well - it beautifully uplifts the fact that periodically all preachers need a humbling experience. Certainly last Sunday was a humbling experience for Peter Martyn. It reminded me -- and hopefully all of us -- that God can use a college drop out who was never ordained to powerfully communicate the gospel. It reminded us that a Lutheran pulpit can affirm the message of a Baptist/Presbyt. preacher. It further reminded us that THE ONE AND ONLY GOSPEL transcends preachers and personalities and traditions and institutions.

In this day when there is so much personality religion, esp. on television -- we desperately need Paul's reminder: we don't belong to Paul, or to Cephas, or to Powell, or to Jimmy Baker, or to Martyn, Meckley, Michaels or Yaconelli. We belong to the Word made flesh ... it is that Word that is the gift of the church. The preacher or tradition or congreg friendliness are not the gift of the Christian Church. THE ONE AND ONLY GIFT IS THE GOSPEL - the assurance of love, forgiveness, and freedom from guilt. That's why Yaconelli's preaching was so gospel-centered. Because he urged us to quit laying guilt trips on our kids and on one another.

That's why our Lutheran tradition values Holy Baptism so highly! Because even before we commit our first moral sin -- God frees us from the damnation of guilt. In Holy Baptism, the gospel assures us that when we turn to God, we can be assured that he won't give us another guilt trip! Instead of condemnation, God forgives us and then says: NOW GO AND DO AS I HAVE DONE FOR YOU! FORGIVE AS YOU HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN ... AND TRY NOT TO MESS UP AGAIN!

That's why we treasure Holy Baptism so much in the Christian Church. That's why we say: One Faith! One Lord! One Baptism! Because Baptism is the one great offering of the gospel given to all Christians! It makes us one! And nothing should be treasured more by a child or his parents than his/her baptism! That's why Luther and Lutherans expect so much of baptismal parents! Because - baptism proclaims the gift of the gospel! IT MUST NEVER BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED! It's like any other great gift -- great gifts need constant care, attention, and nurture!!

As we celebrate the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, Paul's lesson urges us to get beyond personalities and traditions and practices of religion. Our reason for coming to the church - whether it's Yaconelli, Martyn or Michaels in the pulpit -- is to share the ONE AND ONLY GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST! To share the assurance that God loves us, forgives us, and frees us from all guilt -- so that we might leave here today changed and different than we came!!

I didn't know Walter Larson. But from all the comments I have heard in the last decade, I truly believe he was a great preacher of the gospel. People don't remember him for his flamboyant personality or his wild sense of humor -- instead, he embodied God's love, forgiveness, and freedom from guilt. As Paul says, "Walter Larson did not preach himself, but preached Jesus Christ, and himself as a servant of the gospel." We know it's the gospel when it doesn't call attention to ourselves, but rather causes us to love and care for others. I sincerely hope all of you can point to some person or pastor who has been the servant of this GOOD NEWS for you. God deliver us from the religious comedians and cult leaders who preach only bad news - calling attention to themselves, to their traditions, or to their institutions!!

But today we not only celebrate THE ONE AND ONLY GOSPEL! Today we celebrate THE ONE AND ONLY CALLING - the vocation of being the chief management team for Jesus Christ!

Jesus said to Peter, Andrew, James & John: "Follow me!" And we're told immediately they left their nets and followed! Some have interpreted this passage to mean that everyone should leave their jobs and become preachers. There may be a shortage of pastors today, but God certainly does not need everyone in this fishy business of pastoral ministry. The purpose of this story is not to LEAVE ANYTHING ... certainly not to leave our daily jobs to do ministry, BUT RATHER TO BRING MINISTRY TO OUR DAILY JOBS! Our ONE AND ONLY CALLING is to bring the compassion, the concern, and the caring attitude of Christ to our daily work, play, and activity! In short, the CALL of Jesus Christ is to make daily work more than a jungle experience!

This special CALLING was dramatically illustrated for me through one of my dear friends (former cong) who was a very successful banker/ After 29 years of banking, he had almost reached the top position of the bank. At 53 years of age, he was one of the most dedicated, energetic, and compassionate businessmen I have ever known. He had personally brought millions of dollars of accounts to the institution. Yet one February morning WITHOUT ANY WARNING after all these years - he was told he had three hours to clean his desk. When he went to get his final severance check, not one single corporate officer was anywhere to be found to thank him for his sacrifice and corporate dedication over all those years!

I was aghast! I wrote a flaming letter to the CEO of that institution. And yet when I met my friend for lunch two days after his termination -- he was discouraged but defeated. It was this man at this moment who reminded me that there was a GREATER CALLING in life than banking. It was this man who remained the same loving, forgiving, compassionate, sensitive, generous person during the next nine months as he searched for a new job. It was this man who taught me that we can never make the principalities and powers of this world our first CALLING or total ALLEGIANCE. He told me, "the world and its leaders are constantly in flux ... they are forever changing ... strong one year, and weak and insecure the next. Loyal to you one month, and betraying you for your loyalty the next month." It was this man who made THE ONE AND ONLY CALLING of Jesus Christ his chief vocation in all his jobs, his relationships, his church work, and his friendships. THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW JESUS - to recognize that our daily work may be sacrificed on the cross of fickleness, the cross of social change, the cross of economic recession -- BUT THAT THERE'S A HIGHER ALLEGIANCE THAN BUSINESS AS USUAL: to embody the forgiving, compassionate, and generous spirit of Christ even in the midst of life's trying, troubled, and discouraging times.

Yes, the ONE AND ONLY GOSPEL is our Word, the ONE AND ONLY CALLING is our vocation, and finally, the ONE AND ONLY LIGHT of Christ leads us out of the tunnels of darkness thru life and death. Many of you who have traveled in West Virginia are familiar with the turnpike tunnels. Drivers are warned in advance to turn on their lights and slow down thru the tunnel. There is no passing or stopping in the tunnel; you become a slave to your one lane of pavement ... hoping that you'll make it out without a breakdown, an accident or a flat tire. But the greatest sight in these dimly lit tunnels is the glimpse of daylight at the other end. What a relief it is to see the light transform the darkness.

Quite literally, there's nothing like seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. For ancient Israel it was like the darkness of the tunnel never ended. For centuries this people was dominated by Syria, Babylonia, Persia, Macedonia, Egypt, and Rome. The people had literally lived in the darkness of foreign domination. Ancient Israel - just like modern Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Eastern Germany, Armenia, El Salvador - these people have yearned for the light at the end of the tunnel.

In Jesus Christ, God said: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined." It was not that Jesus had come to totally remove all darkness and struggle - but his coming had assured the Israelites that God had not abandoned his people. The people of God have always needed more than the words of prophets ... they needed to see the light of his countenance ... they needed to see the light of the Word made flesh.

The one thing we all yearn for is the certainty that God has not hidden himself from us. He may not wipe away all darkness, but at least we need to have his light with us in the tunnels of our lives. That ONE AND ONLY LIGHT of God was so dramatically seen by a National Council of Churches officer in an ancient town of Israel. The NCC officer was to lead a televised service from an old, run-down, church that was now in the care of a community of monks in Israel. It was a typical ancient sanctuary without electricity.

The television crew was busily setting up generators, stringing cables, and mounting cameras and microphones. Hushed in silence against the back walls were the monks -- looking like guests from another century. Then the moment happened - the director asked that the lights be tested. The whole dark chapel flamed to light. Some monks looked up, nodding their brothers. Soon they were all pointing up. The monks vanished, only to reappear several moments later with all the townspeople of the village.

On the ceiling was an ancient painting. A member of their order, in a forgotten century, had erected scaffolding. And by candlelight high above the small sanctuary - he had painted an unseen masterpiece meant only for the eyes of God. The television lights had brought this painting into full view for the first time in the world.

Like those television lights, Jesus Christ is the light that gives us a full view of the nature of God. That full view shows us a God who loves us, forgives us, hurts with us, helps us, and struggles with us ... in all our moments of darkness ...

even in our moments of fear ...
even in the hour of death ...
even when life seems hopeless ...
even when the tunnels seem never ending.

Christ, the light of the world, has made known that God is always with us ... never abandoning us even in the midst of life's tunnels of darkness.

Today we celebrate THE ONE AND ONLY GOSPEL that transcends all personalities, practices, and religious traditions. Today we affirm THE ONE AND ONLY CALLING that gives meaning, hope and purpose to our daily work ... even in recessions and times of economic insecurity. Today, we uplift the ONE AND ONLY LIGHT that still shines and leads us out of the tunnels of darkness into the everlasting PEACE of the kingdom of God. AMEN.

EPIPHANY III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 27, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"NOT JUST ANY OLD FISH STORY!"

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. ... And Jonah cried, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Jonah 3:1-2:4b

(And Jesus said) "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel." Mark 1:15

How tragic that many, committed Christians have made the book of Jonah into little more than a whale of a fish story. Rather than seeing this as an illuminating parable about God's prophetic call to repentance, these Christians often destroy God's poetic license -- they demand belief in descriptive detail rather than allowing for the divine dimension of prophetic hyperbole. Some of the fervently faithful never get beyond the little Sunday School boy who was asked for his meaning of the book of Jonah. He summarized it as follows: "People make whales sick." For many, that's it -- the book of Jonah is JUST AN OLD, SICK, FISH STORY.

But quite to the contrary - God is having fun and also seriously challenging the faithful through this parable. He calls Jonah to do a difficult task - he wants Jonah to preach his word of mercy to the Ninevites - a nation of idolatrous, murderous, brutalizing Assyrians. And like many of us faced with such a challenge - Jonah runs as far away as he can get ... thinking that he can put physical distance between himself and God. Faced with God's Word which transcends nationalism ... which challenges Jonah's prejudices against the Ninevites - Jonah wants nothing more to do with God. Jonah only wants a God who is nationalistic ... who desires mercy and justice for ONLY Israel, and no other nation. In these days of the Persian Gulf crisis - can you imagine yourself being called by God to announce mercy to the people of Iraq? Like Jonah, which one of us wants to announce God's lofty purpose of mercy to a stiff-necked nation with a tyrant leader like Saddam Hussein?? Yet, that's God's prophetic call!

Is it any wonder that Jonah hopped the first boat out of Israel?? But it wasn't long before this boat encountered horrendous seas. And isn't that true for most of us -- when we escape God's call to justice and honor, it isn't long before the storms of life are haunting us with guilt and fear. And when the crew discovered that Jonah was on the run ... that he was a prophetic coward running away from duty ... they blamed him for the turbulence and threw him overboard. And then God, with

his masterful humor, has a big fish enter the scene. Obviously, this fish is symbolic of God's rescue. But once rescued, Jonah must again struggle with God's whole intention for his life. Now that he has been saved from the waters of death, what will he do with his life?? That is always the key question of faith, as Pastor Michaels so beautifully illustrated last week. The reality of faith is not always having all the answers, but being willing to be HONEST WITH GOD--to pray for direction, to labor for hope, to strive for mercy, and above all, to struggle for God's righteousness in this world. And the old religious term used for that striving and struggling is REPENTANCE. God was giving Jonah another chance - just as he always gives us another chance. The never-ending "call" of life is a summons to REPENTANCE. Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is at hand -- now is the time to repent and believe anew!"

So the image of the whale is not only rescue for Jonah - it also reflects the fact that Jonah WAS LITERALLY BACKED UP AGAINST THE WALL. There was no longer any possibility for escape; it was now a struggle between God's will and his own will. Jonah had earlier made it crystal clear that he wanted to hang onto the old order of things -- bitterness, envy, prejudice, hatred, hostility toward the Ninevites. Jonah had surrendered faithfulness to God to flag-waving for Israel. He wanted no part of repentance and mercy -- he wanted the Ninevites wiped from the face of the earth. And even after his repentance and prophecy - he was again angry with God because the Ninevites were spared. Jonah had become consumed by his own passion for retribution and retaliation. And now, in this whale, he was literally backed up against the wall -- he didn't want to change, he didn't want anything to change for Nineveh, and yet God was calling him to be the agent of change.

So, first, God works on Jonah while he has him captive (that's why worship is so important - it's the time that God works on us while he has us captive). Jonah prays, he struggles with God's will, and finally he recognizes how helpless, hopeless, and destructive life becomes without the presence and power of God. Finally, he proclaims: "Deliverance belongs only to the Lord." And with that repentant cry -- Jonah is delivered ... he is vomited out of the fish.

So WE FINALLY see the deeper meaning of the book of Jonah -- NOT JUST AN OLD FISH STORY, but the story of God calling the whole world to a new order of things -- TO REPENT NOW FROM THE OLD ORDER OF HATRED AND HOSTILITY THAT SO CONSUMES THIS WORLD. And with every call to repentance, THE TIME IS NOW. NOW is the time to turn to a new way ... NOW is the time to change from what we have been to what we can become - to what God wants us to be. NOW is the time to surrender to the Will and Way of God if we really want healing, hope, and harmony in this world.

The last ten days of Persian Gulf telecasts have almost made it too graphically clear that the whole world is BACKED UP AGAINST THE WALL - there is no longer any chance for escape. We are imprisoned in the belly of a whale of a war ... life has really gone fishy! And regardless of your politics or your position on the war -- no one can deny that the whole world is gripped by the old order of things ... by bitterness, by prejudice, by hatred, by hostility, by vindictive rage.

And the object of our passionate anger today is not the Ninevites -- but the terror tactics of one madman somewhat south of Nineveh, Saddam Hussein. Unlike Jonah, the leaders of this nation did not ABANDON their prophetic call for repentance and righteousness. They were far more generous in their "time for repentance" -- instead of 40 days, they offered 5-1/2 months ... a full 165 days. And like you, I want to believe that what President Bush and others were saying to Saddam since last August was truly a word of hope and mercy, and not only a word of ultimatum. I sincerely hope that the word that he and his emissaries were carrying to Saddam was "that God wants justice and righteousness to flourish throughout the Middle East - but not terrorism, not tyranny, and not treachery!" But the word was clear - after 165 days, it would be time to back Saddam against the wall; then it would be time for Saddam to be HONEST WITH GOD and everyone else!!

Well, the last ten days have hardly revealed any signs of repentance. There has been no change of heart to a new world order on the part of Saddam. Instead, scud missiles have been launched hap-hazardly at innocent civilians in Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Persian Gulf, after Friday, has become an ecological disaster, threatening every element of life in that region. And this madman has even gone so far as to have his top, air-force advisors eliminated because they failed to accomplish his design for death. Saddam Hussein need not be feared for his nuclear insanity; he is to be feared for his human insanity. And regrettably, as we well know from AA intervention and other addictions, the only way that insanity can be bridled is through confrontation ... through intervention which says: "STOP YOUR INSANE ADDICTION TO DEATH!" That prophetic message was given for more than 165 days. And now one man's insanity has taken us into the greater insanity of war. How much we all pray that repentance will be forthcoming in less than 40 days!

But lest we forget or begin to act self-righteously, let us not see repentance as a one-way expression for only Iraq. Insanity breeds insanity. Much like Jonah, we too have wanted to only hang onto the old order of things. We have shown our own nationalistic narrowness, our own false pride and prejudice, our own misdirected hatred and hostility toward the innocent Arabs of the world and our own country. We'd best get down on our own knees first if we are among those Americans who are assaulting Arabs either physically or verbally. What kind of patriotism

motivates someone to wave a flag in one hand and shoot a pistol through an Arab-American's restaurant with the other??? That kind of patriotism reflects the worst insanity of Saddam Hussein.

And as one member gave me this article written by Bill Tammeus from the Kansas City Star - how dare involve ourselves in technological combat and then pray to God that he will watch over us, and only us. As Tammeus says, God did not invade Kuwait nor did God order the sending of troops to crush Saddam. Those were human decisions - and now we must be willing to pay the human consequences. Obviously, we continue to pray -- but we are repentant in our prayers, recognizing that the old order of war and hostility brings with it human death and destruction. We prayerfully repent and ask God's mercy for a crazy world!

And with that repentance, Tammeus urges us to ask: Why did we and almost every other nation of the coalition sell arms to countries in the Middle East in the first place? Putting arms into the hands of an unstable, militaristic people does not yield greater stability. It yields a Saddam Hussein or someone like him. So let us repent for our obsession with munitions as the Way, the Truth, and the Life for resolving conflicts and controversies throughout the world.

And before we point a finger only at Iraq, let us also ask ourselves why we have built an economy which continues to demand more and more oil to operate efficiently and effectively. Yes, let us repent from that old order of living which DEMANDS from others without recognizing the risks and sacrifices of such demands.

Above all, let us repent from making this A WAR between the boundaries of Iraq and U.S.A. I sincerely hope that the last ten days have clearly shown that the Persian Gulf War transcends and far extends beyond the vital interests of the United States. The actions of Saddam Hussein quite clearly threaten the viability of the whole world. Certainly this is a time that we should support and defend the honor of our country and those who are fighting for the cause of justice and mercy in this world. But let us remember - this is no mere nationalistic cause - this is a global cause. This cause represents more than waving the red, white and blue or singing national anthems. Like Jonah's call to the Ninevites, we are calling Saddam Hussein to repentance -- NOT BECAUSE HE MERELY THREATENS OUR NATIONAL INTERESTS -- he threatens the very foundation of our universal faith in the justice, love and mercy of God for this world ... and he threatens the very God-given order of creation and the goodness of human life on this planet.

Let it never be said after today that Jonah is JUST AN OLD FISH STORY. This same story is being played out again in the Middle East today. And God's call to us is the same Call that he gave to Jonah: COMMIT YOURSELVES TO A NEW WORLD ORDER, TO THE GRACE AND MERCY OF JESUS CHRIST - FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND ... REPENT NOW AND BELIEVE IN THIS GOSPEL. For God so loved the world that he gave this only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life. For this son came into the world not to condemn anyone, but that the world might be saved through him."

"DELIVERANCE BELONGS ONLY TO THE LORD!!"

AMEN.

EPIPHANY III - 1992
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 26, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE FULL-BODIED SPIRIT!"

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. For by one Spirit we were baptized into one body ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. I Corinthians 12:12-13, 27

More than a decade ago, I speculated sermonically that the 70's would go down in history as the "Shape Up America" era. I was wrong. The fitness programs of the 70's were only appetizers for the full-course entrees of the 80's and now 90's. In fact, body fitness has become an American obsession ... and that's not all bad, especially for persons like myself who tend toward a FULL-BODIED BULDGE. If you haven't visited the new Rec Center at the Univ. of Toledo - you should take that tour and discover the phenomenal possibilities given to U.T. students for keeping in shape. Even corporations today cannot build headquarters without reflecting a concern for both corporate profit as well as corporate fitness. A few years ago, one of my best friends from Oshkosh took me to the Kimberly Clark hdqtrs outside Neenah, Wis. And there I was, naive Peter, thinking for all those years that Kimberly Clark was only concerned about diapers and toilet paper. The workout areas for corporate executives and support staff were unbelievable -- olympic size swimming pools; a work-out gym that would put most NFL training rooms to shame; and the benefit of up to one hour per day of "exercise time" in all these areas as part of your regular weekly paid salary.

Tell me now that our culture has not gone through a great bodily transformation over 2000 years. In the first century, religion was one of the most powerful cultural expressions. But within that expression was the Gnostic movement -- a mentality which totally denied the goodness of the body. The human body was viewed as dirt ... as garbage. It's no wonder that ASCETICISM AND MONASTICISM became the way of the godly in those days; flesh was the domain of the devil. Everything of the body was to be denied and suppressed. Is it any wonder that to this day the Christian church still has a residue of moralistic overtones when it comes to affirming the goodness of the body and sexual freedom.

But pick up the latest issue of PEOPLE magazine ... and you will soon realize that the mores of Gnosticism are long gone. We've done a complete 180 since Century One. Instead of a denial of the flesh, the culture today is mesmerized and erotic over body parts. Now we not only see the body as good, but Hollywood has seduced us into deifying BODY PARTS as more important than the whole -- and so we have a society marketing breast implants and face lifts and cheek tucks and liposuction and eye-lifts and the techniques go on & on.

The list today includes the likes of Nancy Reagan, David Duke, Rosalyn Carter, Angela Lansbury, Katharine Hepburn, and of course, the most disfigured of all - Michael Jackson. When 84-yr old Hepburn was questioned about her eyelifts, she quickly retorted: "Wouldn't you do the same if your eyes were looking like a possum's and feeling worse?!" And amidst this great rush to have body parts re-shaped - along comes the FDA issuing a moratorium on the sale of silicone breast implants. And there stand 2 million women who have already had the surgery, asking themselves too late: "To be, or not to be implanted?" that was the question.

Well - 2,000 years of history hasn't changed us too much, has it? We still haven't caught on to the real truth that God intended for the creation of the body itself. God said from the beginning that the body is very good, but it is much more than its individual parts. And God warned - that once we become obsessed with our bodies or their individual parts -- then we have lost sight of HIS FULL-BODIED SPIRIT!

That was exactly the same problem facing St. Paul in Corinth. The Corinthian Church was not pulling together as one body; it was becoming obsessed with its individual parts. Just like our modern obsession with breasts and chins and cheeks - the Corinthians were saying that this part over here is more important than that part over there; this part here is better than that part over there. And once either the Corinthians or any of us start FIXATING on one part of the body over the rest - whether its the body-human or the body-catholic - then we have begun to distort BODILY LIFE INTO SOMETHING GOD NEVER INTENDED IT TO BE. When either this part or this part of the body becomes "puffed up" at the expense of the rest - then we have lost sight of God's intention for bodily existence. Yes, when puffed-up pride, or arrogance, or silicone becomes the answer for "making it in this world" -- then THE FULL-BODIED SPIRIT of God has given way to the divisive spirit of human perversity.

Today's message from St. Paul urges ANOTHER WAY. Paul offers THREE simple principles of bodily etiquette. First, as those baptized into one body, he says God intentionally created us with a diversity of bodily expressions for the goodness and vitality of the whole. What does that mean on January 26, 1992?? It means that none of us here today were meant to be superbowl stars! Only a few in this world were destined to be Buffalo Bills or Washington Redskins. We all wish that it could have been the Detroit Lions -- but they get the privilege of playing the Toledo Pastors. And yes, there are still some in Ohio who wish that it could have been the Cleveland Browns; but God & the Browns have made it very clear by now that they just don't have the right stuff. So Bob Meckley, wherever you are, quit dreaming the impossible dream! At this time in history - the gifts have been given to the Bills and the Skins ... and the rest of us will just have to be satisfied with the ecstasy of watching them on TV.

Or to put this into a slightly more theological context - God has intentionally created us with a diversity of gifts. In Holy Baptism - God has given us a very special message relative to our gifts (a message he gives to Samantha today): he says - "ENJOY YOUR INDIVIDUAL GIFTS ... NO MATTER WHETHER THEY ARE INBRED, INFLATED OR IMPLANTED ... BUT REMEMBER: THEY ARE ABSOLUTELY WORTHLESS UNLESS THEY REFLECT MY COMPLEMENTARY LOVE." No matter how pretty or powerful our individual gifts may be - we will not be worthy in this world or the next if we focus upon nothing more than OURSELVES AND OUR OWN BODY PARTS. In Baptism - God empowers our bodies with HIS spirit and HIS gift of love. That spirit is given so that we might COMPLEMENT others with what we have first been given RATHER THAN USING OUR BODY PARTS AS A SOURCE OF COMPETITION OR NEGATION of others. That is God's purpose for our gifts thru both creation and Holy Baptism -- to use our gifts to complement and fortify the creation, not to compete & negate in order to have that which was first not given.

That's what I continually underscore in the Lutheran Heritage series. Denominations are diverse not to compete with each other but to complement one another. The Lutheran Church doesn't need to implant Methodism into our body -- then we would no longer be Lutheran. Our mission as Lutherans is not to compete with Methodists, but to be another complementary expression of Christianity. Or said another way - our mission is to proclaim the same gospel of grace and truth in a way that is unique but affirming of one Lord, one faith, one Baptism. Diversity for the sake of unity - that is the mission of every denomination. Our mission as Lutherans is not to bash any other expression of Christianity -- just like our mission as a free-enterprise nation is not to bash any other legitimate manufacturing nation. In short, our mission is to show THE FULL-BODIED SPIRIT OF CHRIST, not to uplift ourselves as God's most important bodily part of the whole creation.

The second principle is much like the first: by divine intention, there is to be equality in our diversity. No gift given is to be viewed as more important than any other gift given. No sex, no race, no country, no group, no entity, no organization within the body is to view itself as better than any other God-given entity. The hand would not say, "I am more important than the leg." The eye would not say, "I am more important than the ear." The heart would not say, "You are nothing without me!" Each part has integral importance for the whole. How grateful I am that during this past year that FULL-BODIED SPIRIT has resonated among a few groups here at Hope where spirit was not always present in the past.

Because it is in this area - the equality of gifts - where we are so tempted to judge only by what we see on the outside. Just like our culture today - which so often judges people only on the basis of the body parts that show - what a tragedy when people of God never get beyond the surface ... never see the deeper bodily presence ... the gifts that go beyond the breasts and chins and cheeks of life.

That was so classically illustrated in the life of

Beethoven. Once he made a long trip to a distant cathedral where he was told was the greatest pipe organ in the world. Weary from his trip and looking ghastly, Beethoven went to the side door where he was greeted by a monk who asked what he wanted.

"Father, I have been told you have here the most wonderful organ in the world. I have come many miles to see it." The monk looked him over, wondering how he could possibly allow such a seedy man into HIS great cathedral. Reluctantly, he finally led Beethoven thru the corridors to the great organ. The master stood at the console, looking hungrily at the keys, and finally asked: "Kind Father, might you permit me to play it?" The monk brusquely replied: "Absolutely not, you dare not ask such a favor, for only the head organist of the cathedral plays this instrument."

"Then might I at least touch the keys," pleaded Beethoven. The monk again looked him over, and at last reluctantly consented. The seedy stranger sat down, and with great genius he swept over the keyboard and music echoed from the organ and through the cathedral like it had never before!

The monk was awed and moved to tears. Finally, he asked:

"Who are you?"

"I am Beethoven."

The monk uncovered his head, got down on his knees, crossed himself and took Beethoven's hand: "My God, forgive me sir! To think that I almost missed letting the true master of the world use this humble instrument!"

How often have we missed the expression of the TRUE MASTER because we have judged someone by only what we see on the outside!? How tragic that we have not allowed THE FULL-BODIED SPIRIT of God's gifts to be majestically shared so that we might be awed and further inspired by those we perceive even as the least of God's children.

Finally, and possibly most important, the diversity of gifts has but one important purpose: TO BUILD UP THE BODY ... TO UNDERGIRD THE UNITY OF CHRIST!! Each gift by itself is but a weak expression if not supporting all the other gifts. There is but one purpose for the diversity of gifts in the Church of Jesus Christ -- that we might see ourselves as God's SUPERBOWL TEAM ... as a team baptized into only one spirit of bodily expression ... the unity of Christ's love. There is no room or justification in the baptized body of Christ for those who always want it their way ... who are unwilling to compromise ... who seek to be negating and attention-getting parts of the body.

That has never been better illustrated for me than through the story of the little girl who wandered away from home into a massive wheat field in the midst of a blizzard.

The neighbors -- viewing themselves as committed Christians -- immediately organized a party that searched into the late evening hours. However, blowing and chilling winds made it nigh impossible for the searchers to even see each other. Just before dawn, the search party finally envisioned THE FULL-BODIED SPIRIT ... they would have to join hands and start across the field as a unified body. And so began their walk together -- hand in hand, body next to body, men and women, young and old, rich and poor -- all joined together for the first time in that community with one common goal: TO SAVE A LITTLE GIRL. Within an hour - they found the little girl. She had become lost in the whirlwind of snow, had fallen down in helplessness, and would have very soon been frozen to death.

They picked up her tiny body and carried her back to her grief-stricken mother. As her mom sat crying tears of terror and joy - she finally thanked the group for their united efforts. But as she mouthed her final appreciation, she blurted out in anguish: "WHY DIDN'T YOU JOIN HANDS SOONER?!?"

How often that becomes the indictment of the Church of Jesus Christ: "WHY DIDN'T WE JOIN HANDS SOONER?!?" Too often, instead of being the TEAM PLAYERS THAT GOD HAS BAPTIZED US TO BE - we act as if we've got all the answers without God or anyone else. We come off puffed-up in public forums, we sometimes undercut the spirit of those who have worked diligently to keep things upbeat and positive, and then we finally take our marbles and go home when we're called upon to be a real team player - divorcing ourselves from THE FULL-BODIED SPIRIT! Last week, during the Budget meeting, someone asked a good question: "Why do we give \$57,000 of our hard-earned money to the mission of the ELCA?" The answer is simple: THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY FOR HOPE CHURCH TO REALLY FULFILL GOD'S VISION IN THIS WORLD -- TO JOIN HANDS WITH THE OTHER 11,000 CONGREGATIONS AND GET THE JOB DONE -- TO SAVE THE LOST AND THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN DOWN HOPELESSLY & HELPLESSLY IN THE WHIRLWINDS OF THIS WORLD.

That's why Jesus identified himself with Isaiah in today's gospel: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Through OUR Baptism into Christ, that is the same message of God's team here at Hope Lutheran ... for we too have been blessed with the diverse gifts of ONE Lord. Many of our gifts are not always visible. But in our Baptism, God has made them equal expressions of his goodness & grace. And there is only one way that God's vision will be fulfilled through our gifts. WE MUST JOIN HANDS WITH EACH OTHER, WITH THE ELCA, & WITH ALL OTHER BROTHERS & SISTERS OF THE FAITH. And we must do this before other little boys or girls in this world cry out in anquish: "WHY DIDN'T YOU JOIN HANDS SOONER?! AMEN.

Epiphany III
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
January 26, 1997 (Annual Meeting Sunday)
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING!”

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, Get up and go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I gave you.” So (this time) Jonah set out and went to Nineveh ... and when God saw what the [Ninevites] did, how they turned away from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them ... and did not do it. Jonah 3:1-3;10 Jesus said, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come; repent and believe in the good news. ... Immediately he called them; and they left their father ... and followed him.”

Mark 1:15;20

(Beeper). Excuse me ... I'm afraid I have an emergency. I'll be back shortly! You've all heard these beepers before. I carry one with me every day of the week. And when it goes off, it usually means that someone important is trying to reach me ... and many time it means a crisis. It's often one of those times that I **DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING.**

Last Thursday afternoon, I had returned home about 3:20 to relax. According to my Glenwood contract, my church time was over until this morning. Just 10 minutes later, at 3:30 p.m., Al Swingle called me from Toledo Hospital and said, “Peter, I'm afraid I have bad news. Tom O'Rourke just died.” I responded immediately: “I'll be right there!!” In those moments - there is no such thing as a contract ... those are the moments that pastors are supposed to **DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING!**

I hope you are beginning to see the meaning of my sermon title. There are moments when God calls ... and he often uses beepers & tv's & telephones today ... he calls and he says: “Christian, there is a need for love and mercy and support in your area--I'm calling you to do it right now--will you respond NOW?” To respond to the call of mercy or support for another person in trouble is what it means **TO GO FISHING IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION.** Needless to say, there's a lot of fishing that needs to be done these days.

The Old Testament lesson and gospel today give us two very different “fishing stories” of God's call. In both cases, God calls followers **TO DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING.** And in both cases, he gets the response that he was expecting ... but in very different ways.

The gospel story is much easier for most of us to comprehend. Peter, Andrew, James and John are called by Jesus **TO DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING** -- obviously, not for fish (they had been doing that all along) -- they were being called to offer the “good news” of Christ's love & mercy & compassion to people in need. And **IMMEDIATELY** we are told ... they **DROPPED EVERYTHING ... AND FOLLOWED JESUS.**

Sounds pretty incredible, doesn't it!? How in the world could these four respond so immediately & enthusiastically to Jesus' call??? Well, if you had received the call from Al Swingle this past Thursday -- how would you have responded the news that Tom has died?? Would you have said, "Oh, well, we all have to die sometime. Thank God he didn't suffer long!" I sincerely hope that you would have done exactly what I did -- **DROPPED EVERYTHING & WENT FISHING** ... went to Bill and his family and offered mercy and comfort. Now maybe you know why the disciples responded IMMEDIATELY -- because they saw Jesus' mission to the world in the same way that you and I would see our response to the death of somebody we loved: THE NEED TO RESPOND WITH LOVE & COMPASSION IMMEDIATELY. Or as the text says, "*The time is now ... it is fulfilled ... the kingdom of God has come ... NOW IS THE TIME TO TURN TO GOD AND OFFER HIS GOOD NEWS.*"

But many times ... your response and mine to sharing God's mercy and love is more like Jonah's response. When God called him to go to Nineveh and tell Nineveh to shape up ... Jonah ran the other way. He saw Nineveh as a wicked place, a den of iniquity ... a place that would be better off wiped off the face of the earth. Jonah felt Nineveh didn't deserve God's Word of mercy. So Jonah decided to go on vacation; he set off in the opposite direction and wasn't going to have anything to do with God's call. Anyone ever been that stubborn?

But God had other plans. He called Jonah again. And after an ordeal at sea with a great fish -- Jonah reluctantly went to Nineveh. He resentfully walked through the outskirts of the city ... and you can just imagine how much energy he put into delivering God's message. Jonah was carrying a message that was against his will. Every salesman knows it's pretty hard to sell any product when you don't believe in it yourself. And which one of us has never acted like Jonah?? We know what God wants us to do, but we think we have a better idea for our lives than God. But Jonah was no dummy. He didn't want a repeat of his ordeal at sea ... so he finally did as he was told.

When he reached the center of the city he cried (and probably not very loudly): "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!" That was it - one sentence and his mission was accomplished. A one sentence sermon -- boy, don't you wish I could do one of those?!? The truth is -- that Jonah wanted Nineveh to "go down the tube." And what happened?? Nineveh heard the Word! Just like the sound of a beeper -- **IMMEDIATELY THE PEOPLE WERE READY TO TURN BACK TO GOD (repentance) AND BECOME FAITHFUL PEOPLE AGAIN!** And it all happened because one little man finally had the courage to call for repentance - to offer one little sentence to a stiff-necked, evil people: "*Soon you will be overthrown!!*"

Don't we all wish that it would be that simple today?? But maybe it really is. When God calls you to **DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING** -- how do you respond ... like Peter, Andrew, James and John ... or like Jonah?? I regret to say -- I think there are a lot more Jonahs in the world today than

Peter's and John's. I've even seen at times where family members are afraid to face pain & suffering in their own families. When someone is hospitalized or in need of care ... they will not even go and visit because they are afraid to encounter the limitations of life. How in the world can we ever expect people to help the poor, the hungry, the hopeless, those in prison ... when they won't even respond to members of their own family who are in trouble??? We've got a real dilemma in the world today! But there's a "good news" answer for it!! The story of the angel who disobeyed God and was given a second chance give us our greatest clue. ...

The angel was summoned before God who said to him: "I'll not punish you, but your atonement is to return to earth and bring back for me the most precious thing in the world." So the angel flew back to earth and traveled the hills, valleys, seas and rivers looking for this "most precious thing." After several years, the angel came to a battlefield and encountered a soldier dying while he was protecting defenseless children. He seized a drop of his blood and went to the Lord saying: "Surely Lord this is the most precious thing in the world ... the blood of sacrifice." And God answered, "Indeed this is precious in my sight ... but it is not the most precious thing in the world."

So the angel returned again to earth ... and after wandering for years came to a hospital where a nurse lay dying after contracting a dreaded disease from one of her patients. As the last breath passed from her lifeless form, the angel caught it and returned to the Lord's throne: "O God, surely this breath of life given for another is the most precious thing in the world." God smiled and said, "Dear angel, indeed sacrificial life for others is most precious - but go again and return with the most precious thing in the world."

So the angel returned a third time. This time he encountered a hideous man riding through a forest. This man was armed and headed for the hut of his enemy to destroy all its inhabitants. As he came to the enemy's house, he looked through the window and saw the wife putting her youngest son to bed ... teaching him to pray for his enemies, instructing him to thank God for all his blessings ... and asking God to forgive him all his sins. As he watched this ritual between mother and son - he totally forgot why he had come. Instead his thoughts turned to his own childhood .. he began remembering how his own mother had put him to bed and taught him to pray for forgiveness and for his enemies. As his heart melted - a tear trickled down his cheek. The angel caught the tear and flew to God's throne saying, "Lord, surely this is the most precious thing in the world -- a tear of repentance??"

God beamed upon the angel, "Indeed, you've brought me the most precious thing in the world. Repentance opens the gates of heaven. It is indeed the most precious thing in my sight!!"

Why would a disciple DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING?
Because every moment ... of every day ... every disciple turns back to God ...

and repents ... and then realizes that he must carry that spirit of love and mercy into the world. Repentance is not judgment! It is God's gift saying: "Come to me and I will give you relief ... I will forgive you ... I will lift you when you have fallen ... I will give you the mansion that I have prepared for you from the beginning." Nothing is more precious than repentance ... because it gives us a clean slate ... it reminds us of the true character of our God ... that he is a God who waits with open arms for his prodigal sons and daughters to turn back to Him. And how do we know that?? Because when the evil Ninevites turned back to Him -- he received them with mercy and forgiveness ... not with damnation as Jonah was hoping for.

Is there anything more valuable for us to share with the world than this good news? Friends of Glenwood, **DROP EVERYTHING AND GO FISHING!** *"For the time is now ... it is fulfilled ... the kingdom of God has come to each of us ... repent and believe in this good news!"*

AMEN.

Epiphany III (Super Bowl Sunday)
Glenwood Lutheran and Sunset House
January 25, 1998
Peter R. Martyn, Presiding Pastor & Chaplain

“GOD’S ‘SUPER BOWL’ STRATEGY”

“Indeed, the body does not consist of one member, but of many. ... If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”
I Corinthians 12:14; 26

Nobody knows what will happen this afternoon, but Super Bowls are notorious for giving fans less than a riveting game. There have been far more “blowouts” than close calls; more often mediocre playing than star-quality performances. In fact, some experts claim that big-money and marketing are attempting a “Super Bowl Makeover.” These people say that advertising, entertainment and endorsements have become a bigger event for many than the actual football game. In fact, do you know what has become the most marketed and video-taped athletic feat of the game?? Not great passes! Not miraculously snagged catches! Not high-flying, point-saving tackles! In this game - the most talked about & taped performances are the END ZONE DANCES. Now put that one in your Super Bowl trivia book.

Well, the facts are -- God doesn't have a favorite NFL team (even though I'd like to believe it's the Packers). In fact, God may not even like football. Recently, many Christian athletes have offered post-game interviews saying “they want to thank Jesus for giving them the victory!” Well, there is no doubt that God has given every athlete the power & the ability to play well--and Jesus certainly deserves some praise & thanks! But like his Father, Jesus doesn't care which team wins; and he doesn't want the losers to feel that his power wasn't with them also. But God the Father ... and God the Son ... and God the Holy Spirit do have a “super bowl” strategy. It is a winning strategy -- not in terms of points, but in terms of peace, unity and wholeness in the world. In short, it is not only a good strategy for the game of football -- it is the best strategy for the “game of life.”

In fact, one commentator actually revised today's second lesson to highlight God's winning strategy using football positions rather than body parts. His version goes like this: *“For the team is one, and has many players & positions, and all the players of the team, though many, are one team. ... Indeed, the team does not consist of one position, but of many. If the defensive end would say, ‘Because I am not the quarterback, I do not belong to the team,’ that would not make him any less a part of the team. And if the right tackle would say, ‘Because I am not a wide receiver, I do not belong to the team,’ that would not make him any less a part of the team. If the whole team were tackles, where would the running backs be?? If the whole team were running backs, where would the quarterbacks be?? But as it is, the coach has arranged the players and positions, each one of them, as he chose. There are many different players and positions, yet only one team. The quarterback cannot say to the tackle, ‘I don't need you.’ Nor can the defensive ends say to the cornerbacks, ‘We don't need you.’ On the contrary ... if one player or position suffers, the whole team suffers together; if one player or position is honored, the whole team rejoices.”*

That's God's winning strategy: "A DIVERSITY THAT ALWAYS YIELDS A UNITY!" And that is the nature of the true Church of Jesus Christ! It isn't God's goal for the church ... it is the way God has designed the church: to be the greatest team of diverse gifts & peoples that He has ever given to the world to achieve his goal of peace & unity. If the church doesn't reflect that kind of diversity and unity -- God is not at fault! It's because humanity has prohibited God's strategy from being implemented. Because as God has ordained his strategy -- he has a three-fold way for the church to fulfill it in the world.

First - the church is to be that one place on earth which recognizes and celebrates God's intentional creation of a diversity of gifts, peoples and spirits to accomplish his winning purpose of peace in the world. Obviously - since God has created us so diversely -- we can't all be "super bowl" football players or pulpit preaches. Only some in this world are destined to be Brett Favre's or Peter Marshalls.

But why -- why would God create this world with such a diversity of gifts, peoples and spirits?? You obviously all know the answer: WE COULDN'T STAND ONE ANOTHER IF WE WERE ALL ALIKE!! Seriously, there is real truth in what seems silly. We cannot survive without being complemented by those who are different from us. We need diverse gifts in order to "get over the goalline" of the world's necessary challenges. That can never be accomplished by any one person, any one group, or any one church. Only as we complement one another's gifts -- and not compete for all the attention -- only then can we achieve God's goal of peace and unity on earth.

That's the goodness of a diversity of denominations -- not for competition, but for complementation. Diversity of expression, but all claiming ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM. Father Raymond Brown, a leading RC theologian says: "In the rise of the various denominations, each one brought back some of Christ's light that had gone dim before the Reformation." None of us can claim to be the full light of Christ -- but as we complement one another ... we bring out the greater brilliance and fulness of Christ's light.

But God's strategy is not only one of "a complementing diversity" -- he also commanded that these diverse parts be seen as equal. In football terminology that means we are not to give the quarterback more glory than any other position on the team!! Or in the church - the pastor more glory than the director of music! As Paul says, "The hand would not say, 'I am more important than the leg.' The eye would not say, 'I am more important than the ear.' The heart would not tell the other organs, 'You are nothing without me.' Each part has an integral importance for the whole.

Maybe there is no better way to demonstrate this concept than to relate it to the average congregation during an hour of worship. How would we celebrate without lights and heat and other forms of building/custodial care? Where would I be without the gifts of scholars, commentators & seminary theologians? How could we worship coherently and with good order without the gifts of

printers, editors, secretaries, worship coordinators, historians, hymnologists, musicians, liturgists? Where would we sit without pew makers? How could Christ be symbolized without craftsmen who make candles, crosses, stained-glass windows and sacramental wares? What kind of worship climate would we have without ushers, acolytes, greeters, altar guild workers, counters, readers, choirs, organists? How would the body of Christ survive without your constant presence, your gifts, your compassion, your consecration, love & commitment? Not one of these gifts is more important than any other!! But only as these gifts are offered up with equal consecration & integrity -- only then do we really experience the presence of joy and peace in this body ... the ultimate, victorious spirit of God!!

Lastly -- and maybe most important -- God's strategy for giving us diverse yet equal gifts has but **ONE PURPOSE: to celebrate and undergird the unity of his people all over the world.** Like football -- each player or position who is only strutting his own gift becomes a very weak expression if he/she is not supporting every other player or position. Possibly no better illustration reflects this power of unity from many diverse gifts than one of Aesop's fables.

An old man had several sons who quarreled with each other despite anything that the father could do to stop them. So, one day he ordered a bundle of sticks brought to him; then he called his sons and asked each one "to break the bundle of sticks." They each tried but were unsuccessful. The sticks were so closely bound in unity that it was impossible to break them. Then the father untied the bundle, and gave each son a single stick which could be easily broken.

"Now my sons," the old man said, "you see the strength of unity." When you stand firmly together, then no one can harm you. But when you separate yourselves and make your own gifts more important than your brothers, then you become easy prey for your enemies ... who will divide and conquer you because you've deprived yourselves of your strength of unity."

The winning football team today will be that team that truly plays w/ "unity" ... the one which celebrates its diverse gifts ... which uses all those gifts equally ... but uses them with one purpose: **TO PLAY AS A UNIT ... AS A TEAM!** The same is true for Glenwood (or any other body of God's people). We give thanks for our diversity -- but we don't make it an end in itself. We never call undue attention to one gift, or one race, or one area of ministry at the expense of others! We are glad this congregation is multicultural, multi-aged, multi-economic, multi-geographic, multi-oriented in serving others -- because God has designed his body that way! We each have something to offer to the other ... but only with the purpose of affirming equality and unity of the body!! That's God's winning strategy for the Super Bowl -- and for every other team endeavor of life! **DIVERSITY ... ONLY FOR THE SAKE OF EQUALITY & UNITY (SAY IT!!)**

AMEN.