

## Fill-in the Blank

[Text - I Corinthians 12:12-18; 27]

Pastor Dave Shackle

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At the conclusion of each Sunday worship service, we form what we traditionally call our “Circle of Community” [though, as our youth like to remind me, it’s technically a rectangle]. Regardless, this particular configuration serves as a visual reminder of what our Community of Faith strives to represent. As we move to the outer aisles and take hold of one another’s hands, we symbolize the connection, unity, and warmth that we want everyone among us to feel and experience. At the back-center doors, however, we leave an opening in our circle, to signify our commitment to be open and welcoming of *anyone else* who comes among us. We all then have the wonderful privilege of looking at the faces of everyone gathered around, and hearing a parting word of blessing and peace. However, every so often, some of our children are guilty of disturbing the peace!

Some of our youngsters who join us from Sunday School, understand this symbolic opening that we leave; others do not. In either case, it seems that it’s extremely hard for many of them to stand that close to someone and not take hold of his or her hand. As far as these kids are concerned, this separation just doesn’t feel right. Bright kids! Not only do they know their *geometry*, they also have a pretty good grasp on their *theology*. It’s as if they instinctively know, until society teaches them otherwise, that there’s an inherent and Holy interconnectedness of Life. People are *supposed* to hold hands with one another! We *should* reach-out when we experience a gap between us and someone else! We *can* freely give away limitless hugs, because there’s really no such thing as a shortage of Love in this world. That’s just something that far too many frightened and sad grownups have come to believe.

Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the Divine Realm like a little

child shall not enter it.” What this says to me, is that the Divine Realm of peace and justice, compassion and wholeness can only be received by those who are willing to graciously accept it - and freely extended it - as a sacred and unconditional Gift. Divine *Love* isn’t something that any of us can ever earn or deserve. It is freely and graciously extended to every child of God, just as authentic parental love is given to every child within the household, regardless of his or her physical, mental or emotional condition. A good parent loves each child equally and unequivocally; though at *times*, will give special attention and care to that child who is struggling or hurting, lost or lonely.

If you were to ask most parents what they most deeply desire for their children, the majority would tell you that their greatest hope is that their children are happy and healthy and fulfilled; that they are kind and caring and loving. And if these parents have more than one child, they truly hope that their children learn how to get along with one another. Simple as it may sound, I believe that this is precisely what our Heavenly Parent, our Creative Source, desires of us: that we open our hearts and our hands to one another - reaching-out to all people with compassion, acceptance, and peace. Indira Gandhi said, “You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist.” And just as a closed hand or folded arms cannot extend or receive friendship or compassion, neither can a closed mind or heart. That’s why it’s so important for you and me to remain flexible and childlike in our thinking, in our faith, *and* in our faith practices.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul expresses an extremely important theological insight: “Now *you* are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it.” Each one of us, regardless of our age or gender, race or social status, abilities or disabilities, are members of the Body of Christ. And all of us have an important part to play in determining how well or poorly that Body will function. Will that Body continue to reach-out with compassion and care to those who are hungering or hurting, struggling or lost? Will it graciously welcome and affirm all those who need the warm embrace of its loving arms? Will this Body freely surrender itself in sacrificial love for the sake of others, like Jesus does? As I look around at our members and

friends gathered here today, I'm convinced that the answer to those questions is a resounding "Yes!"

Brecksville United Church of Christ, as part of the Living, Loving Body of Christ, offers an intentional and exceptional message of welcome, acceptance and *Good* News, in a world where exclusion, division and *bad* news are far too often the norm. There's an beautiful openness and flexibility among the members of this Faith Community. There's a childlike inquisitiveness and wonder about the vast mysteries of this world, this universe, and the Creative Source behind it all - particularly among some of our oldest members! [Which certainly gives me hope in my advancing years!] There's also a marvelous vitality that comes from the younger families and individuals among us - as they bring new ideas and new life to help shape the future of this congregation. And then there's our children - infants and toddlers, youth and teens - all who infuse this community with their joy and laughter, their music and mischief, their inspiration and their insights - like the recognition that our open-ended Circle of Community also presents a gap; and that gaps need to be filled!

The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, envisioning the culmination of the loving and gracious Divine Realm, describes it as a time when, "The lion will lie down with the lamb, the leopard will dwell with the sheep...and a little child shall lead them." I think it's interesting that this prophetic vision of a peaceful harmony between what would be considered natural enemies, is achieved by following the lead of a little child. Maybe Isaiah just happens to notice that when children play together they rarely stop to ask, "What religion do *you* follow? What are your political beliefs? What's your stand on rebuilding that big, beautiful Wall of Jericho?" No, little children are far more accepting - and far less judgmental - than that.

So this morning, let's give thanks for all those children among us, who remind us of the importance of reaching-out to fill those arbitrary and hollow gaps that we adults tend to create and maintain. Let's also continue our commitment to warmly welcome new people among us, to help fill those gaps - remembering that there is always room for others in this Open and Affirming Church Family. And whether our symbolic circle [or rectangle] ends-up being open [or closed] on any given Sunday, it really doesn't matter. What matters is that you and I remember and rejoice that we *are* the Body of Christ - the living hearts and hands and voices of Divine love and grace.