

# ONE

Bishop Lee's sermon to the 2005 Wisconsin Annual Conference

Theme: "One Bread, One Body"

Scripture Lesson – Romans 12: 4-18

Text: vs. 4-5

"For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."  
(NRSV)

"In this way we are like the various parts of the human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body." (The Message)

**GREETINGS! I BRING YOU GREETINGS TODAY!**

Greetings from the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church. Greetings on behalf of the Wisconsin Area and the Wisconsin Annual Conference. Greetings on behalf of my parents, Lillie Lee who is deceased, and Lewis Lee. Finally, I greet you this morning in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

The ONE in whom we live and move and have our being. The ONE who gives us life and health and strength. The ONE who is the single reason that you and I are together in this place on this day, for just such a time as this!!!

Lamarr and I have begun to make Wisconsin our home. We have discovered a few key places needed to make our lives manageable and healthy. And we have developed a rhythm to our day-to-day life that is becoming more and more balanced.

I have learned some things about Wisconsin during this first year.

As one who is lactose intolerant, I was concerned about moving to the "Cheese State." But I have discovered, as one of the first people I met told me, there is more to Wisconsin than its notoriety for cheese. There are the Dells, and Door County and the beautiful open spaces of the northern counties. The sky seems bluer and the lakes are constant reminders of God's touch in our midst. As many people said before we came, Wisconsin is indeed a beautiful state.

I've also learned a little about the people of Wisconsin. We have been welcomed by people I've experienced as sincere, open and caring. Although some don't express a lot of emotion verbally, I've learned you feel deeply. I've found that many people I've met so far are very passionate about what they believe. I've seen that same passion spill over into action, ministry, lived out faith.

I've learned from the 2000 Census and observation that Wisconsin is about 89% European American, with several cultures represented, including Scandinavian and German. It's about 6% African American, 4% Hispanic American, 2% Asian, including one of the largest and still growing Hmong populations in the U.S., and almost 1% Native American.

In March of 2004 Governor Doyle announced that the population of Wisconsin is expected to grow by 1 million residents by the year 2030. If Wisconsin follows the national trend, a significant percentage of the increase will include racial ethnic persons moving into the state, with the Hispanic population still anticipated to be the fastest growing group in the U.S. It is anticipated that growth will occur in almost every county of the state, with the metropolitan centers seeing the greatest increases.

This trend is one indicator of the rapid changes continuing to occur in our world, and in the communities in which our congregations are located. Some of you have already begun to reach out to those around you, building relationship and working together for the good.

I've met with a number of people in the Conference – laity, clergy, committees, individuals and groups. From these conversations several areas of focus for this quadrennium and my leadership among you have come to the surface. They include:

- 1- faith and spiritual formation and development
- 2- leadership development, clergy and lay
- 3- stewardship – beginning with the stewardship of our souls, our relationships, our bodies, our minds and our material resources, including money
- 4- ministries of, with and to young people including children
- 5- continued development, evaluation and involvement of circuit ministry

Entering into the midst of a whole Annual Conference willing to take risks for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ has been a real blessing. Your commitment to try the Circuit way of doing ministry is a testimony to your faith in God. It is a witness that you are willing to do whatever is necessary to be faithful, 21<sup>st</sup> century disciples inviting others to Jesus Christ through your

ministries. Lives and communities are already being touched as Circuits share the love and compassion of Jesus in new ways, in conjunction with local church ministries already established. I hear, through your district superintendents, other Annual Conference leaders, and from some of you directly, as I've had occasion to visit your congregations, about the good works that are being done, in the Name, and for the sake of Jesus Christ, by the United Methodists of Wisconsin. There is undoubtedly much being accomplished for God.

Yet, as I consider today's world and all that is going on in it, it is clear, that there is still much to be done. The integrity of institutions that once taught and symbolized truth and righteousness, including the Church, has been called into question. Revelations of corruption, scandalous and immoral behavior, and increasing disregard for human and civil rights, around the globe, are alarming. It is sobering and distressing to consider some of the things occurring in our world today – especially some of the things being done to children, for example. With ten grandchildren, children are a group I have particular concern for. Children are being sold and bought, and used as commodities for personal pleasure and/or for profit, some, in the United States. Millions of children are orphaned by parents lost to drugs, or to AIDS, or to economic oppression, or to prison. Millions are growing up with not enough people available to love them, to guide them, to hold them when they're hurt, to tell them it's going to be alright. And for some of them it won't be all right. Other children are being raised by TV programs and video games, starving for relationship with loving adults too busy to spend time with them.

As we consider the plight of millions of children in our world, our country, our communities and maybe even our own families -- those related to their plight, come to mind. Some of those related to their plight are us. Because as both religion and science tell us - we are ONE. There's nothing that happens to one of us that doesn't affect the rest of us. Hilary Clinton once said, "There is no such thing as other people's children." All of us and each of us, are the ones in the position to continue or to begin to make a positive difference. Jesus took a little child, and held it in his arms. Then he said to those looking on, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me, but the one who sent me." As a culture, as the church, as a world – we are the ones called by God, to welcome and protect, and to nurture and love -- the children. What we do with and for them, we do with and for God. Our mission work and our mission dollars, in the United Methodist church are, without question, impacting the lives of children and their communities around the world.

But we still have work to do. Our scripture text today speaks to us of another dimension of oneness that the Church has struggled with since its inception. That dimension is our oneness with each other.

Another thing I've learned about the Wisconsin Area is that there are some struggles here. There are issues of relationship, laity and laity, laity and clergy, clergy and clergy, local churches and circuits, congregations and the "ANNUAL CONFERENCE"..... Our oneness with each other, or lack thereof, impacts not only the quantity, but the quality, of what we are able to offer to the world.

For all of our good works, we continue to develop and refine reasons why we can not, should not, or simply will not be in relationship with one another. We separate, divide ourselves, and tear ourselves apart over each other's: skin color; racial heritage; gender; gender preferences; what part of the state or country we live in; economic status; political affiliation; positions we hold or don't hold in family, church or society; theological differences.

Jesus said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." For the Church to stand, to be effective, to have meaning to fulfill God's purposes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must be able to live out the spiritual unity revealed to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Jesus came as the great unifier. His prayer was that we be ONE as he and his Father were one. His prayer was that as we grasp our ONENESS with him, we would live out our ONENESS with each other.

Jesus came as the unified expression of God's love to a people who were diverse.

He came to a human race in which people were different from one another. A people who found their opposites in each other. Jews and Gentiles were about as diverse, different and opposite to each other as people could be at the time Jesus came. They had different social practices, different eating habits, different ways of governance, different understandings of God.

Our text for today comes from Paul's letter to the Believers in Rome. The great city of governance and commerce. The great metropolis. The place of the crossroads where there were people from all over the world and something for everybody. The Good News of Jesus Christ had been heard and received in Rome. By the Jews Jesus said he came for, and for the Gentiles Jesus sent Paul to evangelize. Recent commentaries indicate that Paul's letter to the believers in Rome was written to two groups of believers who had not yet become one. They

were all Christ's followers, but they were divided against each other over several deeply rooted beliefs from before they became Christ followers. Paul's desire was to call them to the larger picture of God's movement in their midst.

God's movement in their midst transcended historical differences, cultural differences, social differences and religious differences. Paul's description of the righteousness and the faithfulness of God's love was intended to transport all the new Christians into a whole new relationship with God -- and therefore with each other. In this new relationship all who believed would know it was true for them -- no matter where they had come from, no matter what they had done, no matter how wrong or right they may have been in the past, no matter how real and broad and deep their differences were -- those who now believed in Jesus Christ would know that -- neither death nor life, nor angels or rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, would be able to separate them from the love of God in Christ Jesus the Lord.

In Jesus Christ they were new creatures. In Jesus Christ they were ONE. Like the human body. One body. Many parts. Every part important. Every part needed for the good of the whole. Every part sacred to God.

There is a word here for those of us in the Wisconsin Annual Conference.

We are Christians, United Methodists, those who believe in God and in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We are those who desire God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are those who are doing all we know how to live out our faith in Jesus Christ in real, day to day, week to week, year to year -- ways. Local church ministries, circuit ministries, district and annual conference ministries are touching the lives of children in need, persons who are incarcerated, families, the poor....even our youth are responding with hands on care to those in need. Like the youth and their adult leadership at the Covenant UMC who became an emergency evacuation center for an elderly assisted-living housing complex when a gas main broke. The residents were evacuated from their home. Not only did the youth welcome the people, they served them food and lead a worship service. It was not what THEY had planned for their youth meeting. But it WAS what God had planned!!! At that time of serving others they lived out their oneness with the elderly and with Jesus Christ and each other.

Like Circuit #30 receiving and welcoming new Hmong immigrants to Milwaukee with not only rice but relationship -- living their oneness with the stranger and with God and each other.

These are just two specific examples of the kinds of things that happen when we are living as the one body that we are in Jesus Christ.

We are not all the same. We don't look alike, think alike or have the same life experiences. We are from different racial and cultural backgrounds. We, like the believers in Rome are different from one another. At times complete opposites – in our churches, in our circuits, in our communities, and-- in our own homes....

Our United Methodist Discipline mentions the reality of difference in pp. 102. Section 2:

“While it is true that United Methodists are fixed upon certain religious affirmations, grounded in the gospel and confirmed in their experience, they also recognize the right of Christians to disagree on matters such as forms of worship, structures of church government, modes of Baptism, or theological explorations. They believe such differences do not break the bond of fellowship that ties Christians together in Jesus Christ.”

I believe, just as Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, the fact that we are different doesn't change the fact that in Jesus Christ we are one. We are one whether we like each other or not. We are one whether we agree with each other or not. We are one whether we understand each other or not. In Jesus Christ we are one body.

The image of being one body is helpful. Because it helps us to remember what it feels like when one part of the body is hurt. When one part is hurt, the whole body is affected. Even a splinter stops us until we can get it out.

Some of the people right in this room have been hurt by someone else in this room. Some have been offended or insulted. Some relationships are torn. Repair may not seem possible or be desired. Still, we are one in Jesus Christ.

The Good News is this, that Jesus came for ALL of us. For you and for me. For us and for them. For those folk over in that section and those in “OUR” section, our pew, our sanctuary..... Jesus came and healed those who were wounded. He came and gave new life to those who felt they had no life or no life worth living. He opened eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear. He came and gave movement to those who could not move. Jesus came to show us what God could do. He came so that we would not give up hope... so we would not turn our backs on one another.... so that we would know -- that in him there is no north or south, no male or

female, no slave or free. In Jesus Christ there is nothing, in all creation, that can separate us from the love of God.

Romans 12: 4-5 (Peterson) "In this way we are like the various parts of a human body. Each part gets its meaning from the body as a whole, not the other way around. The body we're talking about is Christ's body of chosen people. Each of us finds our meaning and function as a part of his body."

What then, is our response? Our response can be no less than to a light in the midst of human blindness to human sacredness to God. Our response is to be the hands and heart of Jesus for the children with no parents, babies with no one to hold them and love them, children living in the streets or alone in their own homes. Our response is to be places of spiritual and emotional sanctuary for women (or children or men) battered and abused by victims of self-hatred. Our response to the love that God so freely gave and gives to us in Jesus Christ to continue to send money, to go and put together homes, and deliver food and medicine and clothing to those in need. So they can see what it feels like to be loved. So they can experience thought us one of the ways in which we are ONE in the spirit and ONE in the Lord.

Our response is to stay at the table – regardless of our real, deep, impossibly different understandings and realities. So that in the spirit of restorative justice, relationships have a chance to actually be restored to wholeness. If we, the church, Christians, if we who say we believe in God who is LOVE -- will live in our oneness -- one day swords will be made into plowshares and the human race will study war, nor racism nor sexism, nor gender discrimination, nor age discrimination, nor any other isms -- no more.

The church can lead the way to unity in our diversity. Unity, not uniformity.

Different is not deficient. Different is the way God made us. And God loves us ALL. We can be ONE: "a single entity, unit object or living being [or body], undivided, forming a single entity from two or more components." We can try it. We can pray for it. We can become who Jesus prayed for us to be.

Some people will think you're silly for talking about this stuff. It's too sweet and syrupy. Too naive, too soft, unrealistic. But that's OK because everybody doesn't want to be saved. Everybody doesn't want to be healed. As Mother Theresa is quoted as saying, when "People are unreasonable and self-centered....forgive them anyway.

If you are kind and people accuse you of ulterior motives....be kind anyway. If you are honest, and people try to cheat you....be honest anyway. If you find happiness and people get jealous, be happy anyway. The good you do today may be forgotten tomorrow....do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough...give your best anyway. For you see, in the end, it is between you and God.... It never was between you and them anyway."

I came to tell you today, that it's always a good time to talk about the love and the goodness of God. It's always a good time to give God the praise. It's always a good time to start all over again to love and to care, to accept and to honor, to respect and to admire the fearful and wonderful works of God that we are. God knows us inside and out, God knows every bone in our bodies, God knows exactly how we were made, bit by bit, how we were sculpted from nothing into something. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. God's ways are higher than our ways. God's plans for us are for good and not for harm, to give us hope and a future.

ONE Lord

ONE faith

ONE baptism

Romans 12: 4-5 (NRSV) "For as in one body we have many members, and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another."

"BECAUSE THERE IS ONE LOAF,  
WE, WHO ARE MANY ARE ONE BODY,  
FOR WE ALL PARTAKE OF ONE LOAF.  
THE BREAD WHICH WE BREAK IS A SHARING IN THE BODY OF CHRIST.

THE CUP OVER WHICH WE GIVE THANKS IS A SHARING IN THE BLOOD OF CHRIST.  
THE BODY OF CHRIST IS GIVEN FOR YOU.  
THE BLOOD OF CHRST IS GIVEN FOR YOU.....

(Read words from Communion Ritual while video going, fade into someone singing..... )