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Emanuel's Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
Epiphany 3C • January 24, 2010
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a • Luke 4:14-21

As I mentioned, the original plan for this morning included a sermon from Pastor Don Brown, in honor of the week of prayer for Christian unity. It's a great time to reflect on our unity in the body of Christ, which crosses all churches and denominations. But this has been in a difficult week for the body of Emanuel's. It seems like God was saying something different to us through the word this week.

We grieve with Linda Nerone and her family members, as they mourn the death of her mother. We grieve the death of Leslie Ann Bertram, a long time member at Emanuel's. Though she was no longer able to attend church with us, we have remembered her presence and declining health in our prayers each week. We grieve the death of Jack Grimes, a very visible member and leader – who was our recent council president. He was one whom we all expected to remain with us, for many years to come.

Three deaths. With each one this week, I heard grief and sadness in your voices. Memories surfaced of ways that Emanuel's has journeyed with these three families. And it became clear that we will not be the same after the losses.

As we discussed in the children's sermon, we feel it every time someone leaves us – because they moved away or felt disenfranchised, perhaps they became ill or died. Whatever the reason, there is a very real loss. And it's a big one! Just like Paul's body imagery, we develop interdependent relationships with one another. We are blessed by one another's presence and gifts. We rely upon one another's love, wisdom, leadership, insights, forgiveness, prayer, special talents and passions.

Sure, we also journey with one another's brokenness and baggage. We don't always get along. But my taste buds love eating things that my stomach – or body – doesn't appreciate. Our 6 month old Peter now has hands that seem to have minds of their own. His hands just latch onto whatever is in their path, and he is oblivious. All of a sudden, something is hitting his head, which happens to be a toy held by that renegade left hand. It's hilarious to watch! Now he also longs to move so much. His legs just don't understand how to help him get over to the toy that is just out of arm's reach. The poor little guy will figure it all out soon.

At times, our body may also have competing ideas of what we're doing. We may have hands that don't know how they hurt the rest of us. We may have legs that seem to be holding us back from others' goals. We may be recovering from saying good bye to gifts offered by others.

After these moments, the presence of Christ's Spirit brings us together. Helps us work through our differences. Strengthens and comforts us as we mourn. The Spirit reunites us, Gathers our gifts and our beings back together, again and again. As Christ's church, we are anointed in baptism to be about his ministry in our world: "to bring good news to the poor..., to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (*Lk 4:18*)

Part of the good news that we are blessed to share is about what happens in death. We will still grieve and say goodbye to our friends in Christ. We celebrate their gifts and lives. We remember God's great love for them.

Yet, once we have joined Christ's life on earth, we are with him to the end. We all know that Christ's story does not end with death. The page is turned, after the stone is rolled in front of the tomb. The stone was rolled away. The power of death and sin were trampled forever.

As members of Christ, our stories do not end at the cemetery. It is true that all of us will die. It is also true that we will all be resurrected to life with God, forever more. Life in the kingdom of justice and peace that Christ proclaimed. Life where mourning and sin and death are truly no more. Life where all the members of our

body of Christ, from all times and places, are united once again. Together we say farewell to several friends this week. And together we sing praise to God for the promise of resurrection and eternal life. Thanks be to God.