

“From Me to We”

Soul Shift – part #8. Based on the book by Steve DeNeff and David Drury

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

[SERMON TITLE] (Welcome, prayer, where we are in Soul Shift, etc.)

Let’s pray....

[PHOTO OF KIDS] How many of you have ever had to wear a uniform? For work, for a sports team, perhaps. My three children all performed in the marching band on Friday night. This is the only year when that phenomenon will happen. Funny thing is, even though I know all my children and what instruments they play, it’s still hard to tell exactly which one is which from the stands. That’s the point. They are all supposed to look uniform.

[SERMON TITLE] Clothes are one way we communicate whose “team” we are on. For example, when our children were little, we used to travel wearing all the same color shirts, just in case anyone got lost. Our family just went to Washington DC, and thankfully, we no longer have to coordinate our outfits. And yet I was still identified by my Northwestern gear. A random jogger running around the Capitol saw me, not once, but twice, and yelled out, “Go Wildcats!” We each had no idea who the other person was, and yet we had a connection.

Through our clothing, words, and actions, we can identify ourselves, and we can also draw boundaries that exclude others. While we were in DC, we saw plenty of examples of separation, discrimination, and oppression when we toured Independence Hall, the Gettysburg battlefield, the African American Museum, the Holocaust Museum, and the American Indian Museum. Each place highlighted stories in history where differences in race, ethnicity, and ideology caused violence, pain, war and death.

[QUOTE] A phrase on the wall at the Holocaust Museum was especially powerful to me. It read: “The Museum is not an answer. It is a question.” That question is, how have our differences kept us apart, and what will we do in the future?

I don’t know who said it, but I was told that 10:00 Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. Even after 250 years of history, our country still struggles with “tribalism.” Will I only associate with people who look like me,

think like me, and act like me? Why do differences keep so many of us apart, specifically, Christians?

[SOUL SHIFT SLIDE] Of all the shifts we have discussed in the last eight weeks, this one ranks the highest on my list. It actually connects with the very first shift we talked about, from Me to You. At the heart of the matter is our ability to empathize with others. But the shift from Me to We goes beyond overcoming our selfishness. The point today is to value diversity and community. To do that, we have to overcome our natural suspicion of others.

Let me show what I mean by a demonstration. I need a volunteer to come forward and hold this sign, while facing away from me. Don't reveal the sign yet.

When we interact with others, there are four levels of communication. First is “I see you.” This is where I make a judgment about someone without any response from them.

Now, I want the volunteer to turn around. This represents the second level of communication: “I see you see me.” This can create within me a fear of judgment. My suspicion of the other grows.

However, when I learn to shift from Me to We, I can change the relationship by seeing value in the other person. This third level is represented by this smiley face I'm holding. “I see you see me seeing you.” I am setting my own self aside and practicing empathy. But the shift from Me to We is still incomplete.

The last piece is the sign they are holding, the other smiley face. “I see you see me seeing you seeing me.” Let me say that better. “I see you and understand you, and you see me and understand me, and both of us appreciate the effort the other is making in the relationship.” This is what it means to shift from Me to We.

Each of us must overcome the tension between maintaining our own individuality while seeking mutual cooperation. We can do this if we understand that God, our Creator, values diversity.

[TEXT SLIDE] Consider the scripture we read a moment ago, the “Body of Christ” passage in 1st Corinthians 12. Typically, we interpret this passage from our own perspective. Look again at verses 15 and 16.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if

the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.”

This is first-person perspective, and this might be how we feel. And so we learn, “I am a vital part in the Body of Christ. I have gifts and talents. I have a part to play. The other parts need me.” All of that is true, but it is still inwardly focused. The picture is incomplete.

[TEXT SLIDE] Instead, try to look at the scripture from a “We” standpoint. Look at verse 21. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” Paul is saying, yes, we need each other!

[SERMON TITLE] Everyone has an opinion, everyone has their own mind. Your thoughts are necessary for the whole. The problem is, with a “Me” mentality, we start to wonder what to do when others disagree with us. “If they don’t all think like me, should I leave?” Or, “If they don’t hear like me, smell like me, taste like me, should I walk out the door?”

People are choosing to leave the body today, not just in the United Methodist Church. When they don’t see what they like, when they don’t find people who conform to their image, as Steve DeNeff says, “They take their love of Jesus to another church because the last one wasn’t spiritual enough.”¹ And in doing so, they rob the body of the diversity God designed.

[QUOTE] Have you heard this quote before? It is credited to William Wrigley Jr. “If you and I always agree, one of us isn’t necessary.”² That’s the same thing Paul means when he explains that the body cannot exist if all the parts are the same.

DeNeff says, “When we move from Me to We, we soften our borders. We open up to people who are not like us. So when someone complains that they don’t like the community because ‘they’re just so different from me,’ that is the point [of community].”³ Community is not conformity; it is unity in diversity.

¹ Steve DeNeff, sermon notes, 28.

² William Wrigley Jr., “The American Magazine” in 1931. quoteinvestigator.com

³ Steve DeNeff, sermon notes, 28.

[SERMON TITLE] Contrary to Robert’s Rules, the “eyes” do not have it. Neither do the feet. Nor the belly buttons, the arms, the livers, the spleens. All the parts of the Body, the Church, were put together by God for perfection in diversity.

When we start to compare ourselves to others, one of two things happens: we get discouraged (“I’m only a pinky”) and we disconnect. Or we get arrogant (“I’m a bicep; let me do this myself”) and we drive others away.

What if instead of looking at people to see what we can get from them, we instead look at them and ask, “What can I offer them of myself?”⁴

[WWII PICTURE] Those of you who will watch the small group video, I apologize for this spoiler, but the story DeNeff tells to illustrate the shift from Me to We is too good to miss:

Toward the end of World War II, a group of American soldiers carried the body of their fallen comrade to a nearby cemetery for burial. They were greeted by a priest who informed them that they could not bury their friend in the cemetery because it was a Catholic cemetery and their friend was not Catholic. Disappointed, the soldiers carried their friend’s body to a place just outside the cemetery fence, hoping to place him as close as possible to the sacred ground. There they dug a small grave and buried him after a humble ceremony. The following day, when the soldiers returned to pay their final respects, they were confused when they could not find the grave. After some searching, they called for the priest again and asked what had happened to their friend’s grave. He said, “The first half of the night, I spent sorry for what I told you, and the second half I spent moving the fence.”⁵

Fences not only keep people out, they keep you in. They isolate you and keep you from experiencing the beloved community. It turns out, there is a fine line between privacy and loneliness.

⁴ DeNeff says something similar in his sermon.

⁵ Steve DeNeff, sermon notes, 29.

[SERMON TITLE] If the church can do anything right now to reverse the trend of shrinking, it's going to have to be for us to embrace this idea: "It's not about me; it's all about we." Resist tribalism. Resist division and partisanship. Remember when the disciples told Jesus, "Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." What did Jesus say? "Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you." (Luke 9:49-50, NIV)

You can be in ministry with someone who disagrees with you. You can be in love with the Body of Christ, the Church, even if she drives you crazy! You can be a part of the local church in a denomination that doesn't always make sense. Do not define yourself by the things and people you are not. Define yourself as a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of the Living God.

It's natural to want to be around like-minded people. It's why I loved marching band and my music fraternity in college. It's why I love living in Northern Michigan. We have so much in common. But I refuse to give into the temptation that everyone in the church must act and agree with everything I say. Ironically, I hope you agree with me for just that one thought!

Trusting Jesus is easy. Trusting each other is harder. It is time to let go of our agendas. It is time to stop sacrificing our relationships simply because we disagree. We need more honest conversations, where we ask ourselves, "What would God desire for our church? What would God desire us to do for the sake of the people who are not here yet?"

[BIBLE TEXT] Acts 2:44 says, "All the believers were together and had everything in common." (NIV) They listened to each other, helped each other, submitted to each other. Will you allow other people to influence your life? Will you be part of something bigger than yourself? That's what it means to become part of the local church. When I offer my church membership class this January, that's what we will explore.

Steve DeNeff says the most important question every Christian needs to ask is not "Do I agree?" but "Can I submit?"⁶ Can the church be different than the world? Can we treasure diversity? Will we move the fences?

⁶ DeNeff, sermon video.

"If you only have your own faith and your own walk with God, you are not all that God has intended you to be." – Steve DeNeff.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Isaiah 56:7b (NIV)

"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."

Reflection Questions

1. "There is no 'I' in T-E-A-M!" What does that phrase mean to you?
2. When have you seen division in a group of people? When have you seen unity? What do you think made the difference?
3. Why does Paul describe the church as "one body, many parts"? Does Grace UMC fit that description?
4. How can you strive for diversity and unity simultaneously?
5. How can you shift from Me to We?