

"Kakounomy"

John 15:1-11

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I. It's a Kakou Thing

For the 194th time, the church in Hawai'i is gathering in the name of Jesus Christ. Much has changed over the years in these annual meetings since 1823, but our purpose for gathering remains the same: to give God the glory, and to encourage one another in service to Jesus Christ our Lord.

This year's 'Aha Iki theme scripture, John 15, is a good metaphor for why we gather like this. The body of Christ is like the vine and branches. The body of Christ is a living network of interdependent parts. Together we bear fruit; apart from one another we die.

In these days when churches all over are feeling the struggle of filling pews, paying bills, enlisting people to serve, and keeping doors open, the vine and branches remind us to place the priority on putting faith in Christ and working together with others. It's not a time to cut back on our efforts, cut bait and let go our mission, or cut ties as if going it alone will save us. It's a time to renew our resolve, recommit to mission, and reach out in love. That's the purpose for gathering here today.

I call it *kakounomy*. This is a made-up word. Don't look for it in any dictionary. It's the opposite, or antonym, of autonomy.

Autonomy comes from Greek, *autos + nomos*, or self + law. So literally autonomy means the "law of myself," "law of me," or, "It's all about me."

Kakounomy combines Hawaiian and Greek, *kakou + nomos*, or the "law of us," "law of we," or, as it's often said, "It's a kakou thing."

The vine and branches metaphor is a kakou thing. The miracles of God, the joy of Christ, the fruits of the Spirit don't happen through autonomous individuals or churches, each doing their own thing, going their own way. It takes kakounomy, that is, doing it all together.

II. Kakounomy Means Together

Recently Zach Wolgemuth, Executive for Disaster Ministries of the United Church of Christ, was in Hawai‘i and then went with me to the Marshall Islands for the Micronesian Council United Church of Christ General Assembly to talk about disaster recovery. In both Hawai‘i and Majuro, he said disaster recovery best happens when we work together. He used an African proverb: "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." That's kakounomy.

The last marathon I ran was a couple years ago. I'll never forget it: It was horrible. It rained before the start, at the start, and after the start. Not only was I wet, but cold from the wind. It was horrible. At least I finished, and no surprise I ran my slowest time.

But I'll also always remember it as the best marathon I ever ran. This one gave me the most joy because I ran it with my daughter. She was a high school senior at the time, wanting to make senior memories, and one memory was to run her first marathon. Not every teenage daughter wants to spend hours with her aging dad. So running together with her made all that cold, wet and miserable day worth it! And unlike all the other marathons where I hobbled at the finish with a pained grimace on my face, this one, she and I had enough strength and energy to sprint to the finish (I let her win, of course!), and we flashed huge smiles for the camera.

If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far—and if you want it to be fun, joyful, memorable—go together. That's kakounomy: doing it together.

John Dorhauer, our General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, who will be here in September to preach at this church, talks about kakounomy, without actually using the term, in his book, *Beyond Resistance: The Institutional Church Meets the Postmodern World* (p.154):

The prevailing mythology in America is that we are all independent bodies. We are taught from a young age to provide for ourselves, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We are taught that we make or break it on our own....

It is a lie—and a costly one, at that. None of us are—none of us can be—
independent. At every stage of our development, and in every aspect of our life,
we are reliant on others for our development and success...[T]eaching the value of
strong, trusting, and mutually beneficial relationships is critical. It is organic. It
is biblical. It honors our most fundamental beliefs about a God who invests in
relationship, builds covenant, and calls for community.

“It is organic.” By saying this, John brings up a crucial point about kakounomy. It’s more than just being together. It’s not enough to use acronyms like “TEAM,” or Together Everyone Achieves More.” It’s not enough to quote proverbs like “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). And it’s not enough to invoke slogans like “United we stand, divided we fall.”

Kakounomy has to be organic, living, growing. Like the vine and branches that can’t be left alone, but constantly pruned to stimulate new growth so that it can bear more fruit, it’s not enough to have fellowship with Christ or fellowship with one another. That fellowship has to keep growing.

III. Kakounomy Means Growing

So how do we do kakounomy? It takes both personal growth and church growth.

1) Personal growth, or, I must grow. Each of us must *grow up* in faith, grow up in Christ. Growing up may mean having to *grow out* of the things that hold us back, like childish beliefs, visions too small, or ideas that are flawed or outdated. Instead, we need to *grow into* God’s will, God’s plan, God’s image of us.

The commandments of Jesus teach us how to do kakounomy: Growing through love for God, and growing through love for neighbor. Growth actually happens in the pruning, in stressing the branch, pushing it to its limits so that growth is stimulated. In the same way, we grow in love, strengthen our capacity to love, when we take it to the limits: *Love the one who is a challenge to love.*

I learned this lesson through Leben. Leben was a first grader when I first met him. He was born deaf and could not speak. At church, Sunday school teachers spent many meetings talking about him, either trying to figure out how to communicate with him, or trying to figure out how to keep him under control because he disrupted the rest of the class. The best we came up with was to tolerate him as best we could.

Jump ahead a few years. We had kids’ camp, and Leben, now in fifth grade was signed up to go. Some of the camp staff and counselors were worried, again, about how to communicate with him or how to handle his disruptions. But when we learned that David, his cousin was coming, we breathed a sigh of relief. David knew American Sign Language and

could talk to Leben. At camp, although other kids kept a respectful distance from him, Leben seemed happy. At least he wasn't an issue for us.

On the way back home from camp, the bus broke down on the highway. For two hours we waited in the hot sun until a mechanic could arrive to fix it. When we finally got back on, we were tired, and most of the kids were quiet, getting drowsy and starting to nod off—except Leben, who was going strong and getting stronger.

A few counselors decided to sit with Leben at the front of the bus so that he wouldn't bother the other kids who were starting to fall asleep. They didn't have anything in mind except to sit with him and keep him from disturbing others. But Leben had other ideas. He turned to them, asked for paper, drew something, then made a gesture with his hands. It was a simple sentence in sign language: *I love you*. The counselors signed back, I love you. He moved on to other words and signs, and by the end of the trip, they were all have a simple, spirited conversation in sign language.

In the weeks after, we learned that Leben, always so full of energy, was also incredibly bright, genuinely loving, and endlessly joyful. More than that, we realized we were not Leben's teachers. He was ours, teaching us how to love, and how to grow and strengthen that love. He showed us the power of kakounomy.

2) Church growth, or, the body of Christ must grow. The way the body of Christ grows is to be more like Christ.

John Dorhauer, whom I quoted earlier, tells us how churches grow:

I believe we should be cultivating *partnerships and relationships* between churches and other organized bodies who share their vision, their mission, and their core values. This should be as natural to us as breathing. I encourage all of our churches to develop partnerships with other churches (*Beyond Resistance*, p.154).

It's about *partnerships*. Our 'Aha Pae'aina theme is "Called as Partners" for a reason: because that's the essence of kakounomy. Everything we do this week—meeting together, welcoming new friends from the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea, hearing workshop leaders who will give ideas for cultivating partnerships, and all the praying, worshiping, singing, discussing, voting, eating, fellowshipping—all that is kakounomy.

It's also about *relationships*. At these meetings, we do a lot of relating, but a lot of that relating is also in the form of fighting, blaming and shaming. Our meetings this week will likely be no different, and so we should pray for ourselves and for those who will lead, especially the various chairpersons. Let us pray that we will do the relating, but necessarily the fighting.

Henri Nouwen, the Franciscan priest who wrote about spirituality, tells this instructive parable.

John and Sandy are two very simple people. We all have Johns and Sandys among us. One day John said to Sandy: “We have never had an argument. Let us have an argument like other people have.” Sandy asked: “But how can we start an argument?” John answered: “It is very simple. I take a brick and say: ‘It is mine,’ and then you say: ‘No, it is mine,’ and then we have an argument.” So they sat down and John took a brick and said: “This brick is mine.” Sandy looked gently at him and said: “Well, if it is yours take it.” And so they could not have an argument.

As long as we keep bricks in our hands and speak about mine and thine, our little power games gradually will escalate into big power games, and our big power games will lead to hatred, violence, and war....[O]ur fears and insecurities lead us to grab bricks wherever we can. But when we dare to let go of our bricks, empty our hands, raise them up to [God] who is our true refuge and our true stronghold, our poverty opens us to receive [God’s] power, power that heals, power that will be a true blessing for ourselves and our world (*The Path of Power* [1995], pp.45-46).

Let us be a blessing for the world through partnership and relationship as we practice kakounomy.