Belonging

1 Corinthians 12:21-31a

The adult human body has 206 bones, over 650 named muscles, and approximately 20 lbs. of skin, along with ligaments, cartilage, veins, arteries, blood, fat and more. Every time we hear a sound, take a step; draw in a breath, hundreds of diverse parts work together so that what we experience is a single movement, our minds and bodies working as one unit. We are an amazing creation! Even the greatest of engineers struggle to achieve anything like it in mechanical form. This body of ours is one of the most complex systems in existence.

So perhaps it is no coincidence that the human body is one of the more insightful images for the church presented in the Scripture. The image carries both complexity and organic unity. Have you ever attended a Bible Study or retreat where you were asked, “If you were a body part, which part you would be and why?” Often people find it difficult to name their special gifts and place in the church, but when asked to envision themselves as a part of the body, children and adults of all ages often have little difficulty identifying themselves as hands or feet, eyes or ears, and funny bones! So . . . which part would you be?

Belonging. . . We come to the waters of baptism as individuals, independent and relatively self-contained. We come through the baptismal water changed whether we realize it or not. Our identity is no longer singular; we can no longer truly be known without reference to that community into which we have been incorporated: the body of Christ, the church. (This is why for many pastors it is important that baptisms take place within the community of faith!) After baptism we are more than just ourselves; we are by definition, beings-in-relationship.

We say during the baptism of infants that “baptism is the outward and visible sign of the grace of God. . . baptism with water and the Holy Spirit is the mark of their acceptance *into the care* of Christ’s church . . .” and for adults “Baptism is the sacrament through which we are *united* with Jesus Christ and *given part* in Christ’s ministry of reconciliation . . .” (UCC baptismal service words.)

One of our basic human needs is the need to belong. We seek a place in this earth. We long for significance. One of the gifts of the Spirit through baptism, is belonging. Even those of us who are hopeless introverts feel deeply the need to be part of something beyond and bigger than ourselves.

Yet there is a tension here within the church. Some people what to belong without really belonging. They are the ones whose obituary reads, “George was a lifelong member of old First Church.” Except that no one at Old First can ever remember meeting him, although 92 year old Mrs. Smith thinks she might remember seeing him once at a wedding, and then there is that entry for him in the cradle roll, though nothing after that.

As far as 1 Corinthians is concerned, there is no such thing as belonging without participating. That nullifies the nature of the body. A body does not work when one part checks out for a few years. Not only will its function be unfulfilled, but the rest of the body will be thrown out of balance. Belonging is not a one-sided affair. *We are given the gift of belonging, but we are also signing up for the responsibility of functioning as part of the body of Christ.*

Every member of the church is given a gift or gifts, to be exercised “for the common good.” (12:7) Belonging means participating. One of the tasks of the community is to discern the gifts of its members; some of which Paul names in this chapter. And beyond just naming, the church is to seek ways in which these gifts may be utilized.

It importance to recognize the use of these gifts as we did this past Sunday with our Church Service Award presented to Brad and LuAnn and Deacon Emeritus honor bestowed on Joan Bell. It is important to recognize and thank people for their ministry to and through this church. It helps to build up community and encourage others to use their gifts, but we must be careful, we need to also remember those who work faithfully but quietly, unseen by others. *All of us and all our gifts are needed to make us be the church we are called to be.* Everyone here has a place in this local expression of the body of Christ known as the Congregational Church of Laconia UCC! ***All of us!***

One of the strengths of the body metaphor Paul employs is to provide an opportunity to speak about the place of those who are not normally valued in our churches and society. This passage suggests that every single person in the church, *this church,* matters – the housebound elderly, babies, those with limited incomes and abilities, as well as the generous givers and hard workers.

This is a reality we can name, and it has less to do with equality than with wholeness.  **Only with all of our members working together can the body of the church be whole!**

There is a parishioner in one of the churches I served that because of her health wasn’t able to do much physically or financially but she would come to me on occasion and say “Pastor, I’ve been praying for you.” and every once in a while she would ask as to whether or not something was weighing on me because she has sensed there was. And she was most often accurate in her discerning, whether I would always be transparent with her or not was another thing, sadly! Her prayer life brought wholeness to the church or at least to its pastor!

There is the section of the passage that speaks of suffering and rejoicing with one another. Now I sense, Paul means more than making casseroles for a family in need or throwing a party for someone celebrating. Don’t get me wrong, these are important, and we should be doing them. What Paul is speaking about runs deeper. It is about a community that shares its life, the totality of it, with one another. Many of us rarely experience this kind of community. All too often our relationships are functional, existing in order to do or to achieve something.

But our relationships in Christ in a sense have no purpose beyond themselves. They exist as the visible expression of God’s love; a love that simply takes delight in the presence of the beloved. As a part of the body we share each other’s lives, in good times and difficult. As we do, we become tangible expressions of God’s care. We can know that God loves us as we are held in such a community of care.

This is the vision of the church; not a building, but a body of people, caring for one another, sharing the work of God in the world. *We are not a group of people that meet in this church, we are* ***the church*** *that meets in this building!*

But hear this, people of God; lest this be heard as just another burden placed upon already overburdened people, it is important to remember all this is made possible by the gifts of the Spirit, who works in and through each of us. All of us who are part of the body belong to Christ, and we depend on the Spirit, who is life.

After all this talk of the many of gifts of the Spirit, Paul concludes by acknowledging that not all of us have the same gifts but challenging each of us to reach for *the greater gift*. So he concludes all this talk of spiritual gifts with these words: “And I will show you the still more excellent way” . . . a way which is open and possible for all regardless of our individual spiritual gifts. Then he moves into that wonderful passage . . . Do you recall what follows? (“If I speak in the tongue of mortals and angels but have not . . .