

I Corinthians 12:12-27:

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Luke 4:14-21:

*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the God is upon me,
who has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
Who has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God’s favor.”*

¹ Since 2021, you can see this message at the end of the end zones of several football stadiums. It was a social justice awareness initiative to encourage people to affirm our interconnectedness and need for mutual respect and justice. It is a potent message which we still need to hear today.

And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus, who began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The older I get, the more aware I become of how astonishing our bodies really are. We are living organisms that are constantly being renewed through countless interconnected processes. Throughout our lives we are completely dependent on oxygen, water, chemical elements, minerals, and other lifeforms to survive. We are ourselves host to countless bacteria without which we could not digest our food, to name just one symbiotic part of our existence. We are microcosms within the macrocosm of our planet and beyond. The great Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh described our reality not just as one of interconnectedness but of interbeing.² Nothing exists independently but comes into being and dissolves because of other elements and conditions which arise and dissolve. We call ourselves human beings but are made of all these other elements and factors without which we could not survive. We are inter-beings. We inter-are.³

We also depend on each other for a sense of belonging and purpose. Countless studies have shown that we are made in such a way that we cannot survive without social nurture and physical touch – thank God for those hands. We need to be part of a larger whole to thrive. We need others to mirror love to us. It is no wonder that the Apostle Paul used the same image of the body to speak of the interbeing among members of the church community. He did so, however, because the “body” was not in harmony. There had been a measure of dissent among the members of the church in Corinth. Some of the division reflected the class biases of the wider culture. For example, those with means would not properly share with others who had

² This is also known as the *Doctrine of Dependent Origination* in Buddhist teachings.

³ Just take a moment and look at one of your hands to make this real within our own bodies. Open and close your hand for a moment, slowly and deliberately. Imagine all that is involved just in making this movement happen. We need the organ of our brain to send nerve signals. The brain cannot function without the heart pumping blood. No pumping without the oxygen exchange using our lungs with input from the air. No blood flow without arteries and veins, no stability without bones which need minerals– all made of elements shared with other lifeforms. No energy in our muscles without nutrients taken in from the abundance of what feeds us. We inter-are indeed. I find it amazing

less when celebrating the Lord's Supper.⁴ In many churches, those Christians of Jewish origin still struggled to welcome Gentiles (not Jewish), given the highly flawed and charged notion of a "chosen people." Some in Corinth quibbled over which spiritual gifts, such as teaching or prophesying, were more valuable than others. Paul wanted to help the community discover its interbeing, so to speak, as people marked by the love of God.

Comparing a human community to a body was not new in Paul's time. However, it had generally been used as a metaphorical tool to reenforce hierarchies. People of lower social, ethnic, economic, or political status were told they were "inferior" parts of the body who needed the guidance and protection of supposedly "superior" parts.⁵ The latter, of course, were equated with those who held power and privilege. For Paul, such old labels of division had become meaningless for people touched and united by the one Holy Spirit. Paul often cut across lines of faith background, gender, and social status, including the reality of slavery, to proclaim equality before God. Paul saw the church as the embodiment of the living Christ on earth, here and now, blessed by diversity, striving for equity, and inclusion. It was Paul who made it his life's work to broaden the Gospel of Jesus Christ to non-Jews.

Today, we are striving as a church to extend our affirmation explicitly, welcoming "persons of every race, ethnic background, age, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, physical or mental ability, socio-economic status, marital status, and faith background." All are welcome here. We aspire to live in a way that affirms the good news of Jesus that God's love is for everybody, that everyone has equal worth as a gift from God, and that we depend on each other in our interbeing.

Paul also stressed the point that God has deliberately designed the body of Christ, the church, in such a way that those who are overtly labeled as "inferior" by the culture should receive particular care and honor. I realize that Paul comes close in his language to saying that some members are more "honorable" or "respectable" than others. I hear this as a way of reversing

⁴ The Lord's Supper involved sharing food. It is not clear exactly what happened, but perhaps wealthy members ate a full meal beforehand or did not want to sit and share at the table with certain members who were of a different class.

⁵ See Troy Miller in, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 281.

known class labels of society, seeing the church as a learning ground to move beyond them. Honoring someone who might be perceived as lacking or “inferior” by the measures of society should not be about offering a patronizing pat on the back, but an acknowledgment of the actual worth and dignity God has invested in every person. By giving more deliberate honor or affirmation where it has been denied, we are learning to see each other as God sees us. I would add that all whose heads might get a little too big because of their leadership, status in society, length of membership, or deep financial pockets, need to remember that their significance primarily rests in being a part of the whole.

Our text from Paul reminds us that it may take a leap of faith for some of us to trust our sense of worth. As Paul writes, ¹⁵ *“If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?”* Translated into our own context, there may be some of us who may feel less significant because we don’t like to speak in public or lead a committee. Or we may feel we don’t have a voice because we are new to the congregation or can’t contribute as much monetarily as others. Or we have internalized negative messages and discrimination to the point that we cannot love ourselves as God loves us.

As members of this one body, we all share unique but interdependently-needed gifts without which the whole could not function. Paul believed that we are richer for the diversity among us. Just look at the Annual Report to get a sense of how many people and their unique talents work together to make our church such a vibrant and caring community, led by God’s own Spirit and vision. Even the report cannot capture how much is done for our mutual care and concern for those beyond us behind the scenes.⁶ We are again fortunate to have new members join our church today, bringing their own unique gifts and experiences with them.

⁶ This includes the gifts of presence and prayer of those who feel they cannot do as much as they used to due to illness or aging.

Like Paul, we celebrate that our joys and sorrows are also bound up with each other. This extends to the well-being of other creatures and beings on this earth, which is itself in a way, the body of God.⁷ Internally, we know as an interconnected faith community that if one part suffers, all suffer. If one part thrives in a new way – perhaps a new initiative - we can all celebrate because we are, fundamentally, part of this striving. Who we are and what we do is blessed when it is rooted in the greatest gift which Paul identifies in 1 Corinthians 13 as love, supported by hope and faith. Yearning for and expressing this gift of love is our greatest spiritual gift and challenge.

This is especially true at a time in our country when polarization, tribalism and White Christian Nationalism are on the rise. (I have preached on the latter in the past) I am certainly not suggesting that everything was rosy in the past or that there aren't legitimate alternatives to how certain things are done. However, recent policy developments are threatening to undo a more holistic view of how the health of our planet and all its inhabitants is interconnected with the health of our immediate communities and personal lives.

We are also seeing threats to valuing the equal dignity and worth of people who do not fit white heterosexual hierarchical evangelical Christian norms. These are days when loyalty sometimes seems more important than giftedness and experience when it comes to filling vital positions. Federal employees are being asked to report on colleagues who promote Diversity, Equity and Inclusion concerns.⁸ Institutions like the Justice Department meant to be independent branches to ensure the proper observance of law are asked to drop Civil Rights cases in process. Positions charged with ensuring accountability are being eliminated. We witness blatant scapegoating of whole groups of people, such as immigrants.

These are all examples of actively undoing the radical vision of the Body of Christ which Paul held forth in our text for today. Some parts are cut off from the Body, some are being told they

⁷ We live in a time when we more clearly see the interrelated effects of climate change reverberating around the planet. We see the suffering of animals who are used and abused for profit. We still see rainforests and other ecosystems destroyed for profit, undermining the very basis of our existence. One of our major invitations and challenges is to learn to see all of creation as the body of God.

⁸ Reuters News, "Trump campaign against diversity urges government employees to turn informers", January 22.

are not welcome and or seen as an aberration or not worthy of protection. Other parts are elevated to elite status. That is not the good news of Jesus Christ who sought to liberate us from tribalism and oppression as proclaimed in our Gospel.

We all need to keep our eyes and ears open and not just turn away passively. Liz Charles McGough, the director of the Maine UCC summer camp called Pilgrim Lodge, shared a quote for times like these in a recent reflection. She had received a postcard from a friend which had these words printed on it: "We must be Lighthouse Keepers for Each Other. I will tend the beacon when it seems impossible for you to find [your way]." These times may well leave us feeling like we are adrift at sea on a stormy day. Where and how do you even begin to find your way back to something resembling a safe harbor to resource and connect to what we know is of ultimate value and truth? How can we be a beacon for each other in these times when we are struggling to find our way back home to ourselves, to connection, to love?

Meditation teacher Jack Kornfield recently pointed to Mr. Roger's story of what his mother would always say to him when he was frightened by something he heard on the news or as he was picking up on the anxiety of adults around him. She would say: "*Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.*" Such help can come in a myriad of forms. It may be the practical work of helping at a food pantry or at a warming shelter on a cold night. It might mean joining one of our Action Groups for Justice & Witness. Perhaps you can drive a new Mainer who has found asylum here to a job interview. It might be writing to your elected officials or the local newspaper to give voice for your concern for justice and the balance of power. Perhaps you can reach out to a LGBT+ friend or relative who may be feeling especially frightened right now. Perhaps your calling is to double down on efforts to address climate change. It may mean making a cup of tea for a friend who is feeling anxious and offering a prayer to calm the soul.

Trust your agency within to be a force for the good and for love in this world, in your own unique way, as part of the Body of Christ. The work always includes our inner growth. Let us keep asking for God's power and grace to help us to see how we still can grow and change to make sure that our collective body is healthy, strong and alive to interbeing. What better way

and place to do it than in a thriving community of people who seek to love and honor the dignity of each one as an equal and blessed member of the whole body? It does take all of us. Together, we can indeed help each other be the beacons to light the way home to unity and belonging in God, our source and sustainer of all life.⁹

⁹ Check out this video of people holding on together. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMz6JWimOA0>