

*“A Question of Body Parts”*

*(Second of three sermons on “The Corinthian Questions”)*

*I Corinthians 12:12-31a*

*January 27, 2013*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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A few weeks ago we played “Mad Lib” in Confirmation, which is where you fill in random nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs into a pre-written script. One of the nouns requested was a “body part,” and the teacher’s guide warned “Keep it clean!”

This sermon will keep it clean but also keep it real, as we wrestle with Paul’ practical and spiritual guidance in building up the church in Corinth. The practical question is “How do we build up community—relationships—with one another?” The spiritual question is “How can pride in our gift help, rather than hurt, the community?”

A quick review, of which more details can be found in last week’s sermon on-line or in the back of the sanctuary: the church in Corinth, Greece was founded by the apostle Paul about 50 A.D. He spent 18 months there, his second longest in any of his churches; and this letter is written to address problems that developed after he left.

By Paul’s time the city of Corinth, re-established by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., was the largest in Greece at about 600,000 people. It was a cosmopolitan port on the main east to west commercial route that allowed merchants to avoid the dangers and costly trip around Cape Malea, Greece’s southern tip. Known as the “city of Aphrodite,” the Greek goddess of love and beauty, Corinth had a reputation for sexual immorality reflected in the proverb of Mediterranean sailors, “*Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.*”

Paul helped the Corinthians understand that their diversity reflected their diverse gifts, which they (and we) can celebrate as gifts from God; and makes our spiritual journey one of identifying and using our gifts. When confidence in our gift becomes thinking “I’m better than so-and-so,” Paul sketches one of the most famous pictures of church unity ever written: the Body of Christ.

The idea was not new to Paul. The Greek philosopher Plato, 450 years before Paul, drew a famous picture in which he said the head was the citadel; the neck, the isthmus between the head and the body; the heart, the fountain of the body; the pores, the lanes of the body; the veins, the canals of the body. So Paul drew for his Greek listeners a picture of the Church as a body, consisting of many parts but with an essential unity.

Plato pointed out that we do not say, “My finger has a pain,” we say, “I have a pain located in my finger.” As medical professionals know, the pain symptom is not always the pain source. I’ve had surgery for herniated discs in my neck twice: in 1994 and again in 2007. The presenting symptom was NOT pain in my neck. (Yes, I can be a pain in the neck, but stay focused here!). The symptom was numbing in finger tips, initially masquerading as carpal tunnel but really caused by the disc pressing on my spinal cord. Eventually the whole hand went numb. The body is an essential unity.

So is the Body of Christ. “*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it*” (vs 27) makes two essential points: First, the Christian Church is not like a body, it is a body. We have an organic relationship: if one member suffers, all suffer together. If one rejoices, all rejoice. Second, each gift is essential to the body. There is humor as well as seriousness in what Paul writes. Since we usually see the seriousness and miss the humor, listen to what Darlene has to say:

Hi. I’m Darlene. And I’m in the handbell choir. I’m F#, at least most of the time. I also cover the high G, but we don’t often have songs that go up that high.

I’ve been in the handbell choir for almost a year now. Took me a long time to get the hang of it. Sure, it looks easy from out there. But there’s a lot of technique to a good stroke. See when I first started, it sounded like this. (Demonstrates the sound). But now, after a lot of work, it sounds like this. (Sounds exactly the same) See what I mean?

So I hope to be able to work up to getting a 3rd bell. You get a third bell when you've been around a long time. A few even have 4 bells to their name. I just have this F#. (Demonstrates again) It has a very nice tone, though don't you think? I love being in the choir. Everyone has their place, and each person does their part. Me, I'm F#. That's my job. And everybody counts on me to be F#. If I'm not there, you should see the hole it leaves...

Actually, it's not that big of a hole because... well, F#s don't come along as often as some of the other notes like C or maybe E. Those are the prime notes that are really hard to get. You know, come to think of it, I think maybe our director is avoiding F#. Seems like he always picks songs without F#s. I wonder if he isn't intentionally avoiding me... That would be just like him. And he probably thinks I don't notice.

You know, to tell you the truth, I'm a bit fed up with the handbell choir. As hard as I try, I can't seem to break into the inner circle. It's a very subtle thing, but I think they're keeping me out on purpose. I don't think they want to give up any of the prime bells. So they leave me with F#.

Which is fine, really. I happen to really like F#. In fact, I've never heard a nicer F# than this bell right here. So as far as I'm concerned, I'll just stick with it. I mean, who really needs the rest of 'em anyway? After all, if you want a note played right, sometimes you just have to play it yourself.

Wait, I've got it! Of course! Handbell Solos! I could do Handbell Solos. It could be a whole new thing. I could travel to other churches. Do concerts in the park. Actually it would be sort of duet. Cause I do have 2 notes.

All I need is this F#. That's all I need. And this high G. The F# and the high G. That's all I need. And this music stand. The F#, the

high G, and the music stand. That's all I need. And maybe these gloves. That's all I need. Why, I could do a lot with these. I bet I could find a lot of songs with these 2 notes. And if I practiced and worked hard, who knows what could happen? That way I'll never have to wait for other people to come in at the right time. I'll never have to cover for other people's mistakes. I'll just do my own thing. Yep. Just me and F#. That's all I need.

(Crosspoints, "Handbell Solos," [www.crosspointscripts.com](http://www.crosspointscripts.com))

It's clear as a bell, isn't it? We need something besides an F#!

**We need each other.** It is usually in our time of greatest need or weakness that we know that. How about learning it in our places of strength? We need those who think, look, act and function differently from us. We need the whole octave of notes, and all the flats and sharps, if we are going to coax from this Body the music of which it is capable. Paul's point that some parts are weaker but have greater honor is irresistible. The children? The youth? The aged? The middle-aged white guy? The up-front leaders and the guys and gals flipping burgers at Fair on the Green? You tell me. We need each other with our public and private gifts.

**We need to respect each other.** I learned a long time ago that some people will say they will do something, and do it. Some people will say they will do something, and not do it. Some people will not agree to do something, and show up to do it. And some people won't speak up or show up because it is not the right "match" for them. Understanding this as a personality characteristic and not a character flaw is very helpful in avoiding being judgmental and having realistic expectations: not only in church, but at work and home, too.

**We need to empathize with each other.** The church is a whole. When we cannot see beyond our own family circle, group, congregation or civic community, we have missed the essential unity of the church. We seem to do this well in prayer, but I am less convinced that we are reaching beyond our existing circles to invite people into service in the

church and to get to know one another. Growing churches have this: a passion for people, new people and an empathy for what brings them to church in the first place. If you look at the early church as we are doing in Confirmation these last few weeks, it was the passion of those who first came to Christ that launched missions. One of the curses and gifts of being a new pastor is that I still don't know many of you. It is a curse because I want to, but it is a gift because my ignorance can be an opportunity for all of us to get to know each other better.

A quick vignette: last Thursday at Community Suppers I was a few minutes late and the prayer was said in my absence. I asked someone who will remain nameless who said the prayer, and they said, "The woman over there with the blue hat and the purple jacket." The woman was Jane Vink, Co-Chair of Missions and wife of the Pastoral Assistant, among many other roles. This is not to embarrass anyone; and, yes, I know that Jim Repetsky is ready with a welcome mug and Flo Berrien with a smile and a welcome. More of us need to be Flos and Jims in this way. What might happen if each of us chose just one unfamiliar person to ask "*Are you new, or new to me?*"

This Thursday, at our Membership and Evangelism Committee meeting, I am going to ask them to endorse an initiative by which we recruit ten people committed to being ambassadors for six months. They will commit to being in church most Sundays and, when they are, finding at least one person they do not know, welcoming them, inviting them to Fellowship Hour and to meet the pastor and/or one of the Lay Leaders. Some of us do this now, More need to, if we want numerical growth translate into a deeper mission and service.

We have a gift. We need each other's gifts. By the power of Christ we can use our gifts, appreciate others and be ambassadors for Christ. Amen.