

Corinthians 12:12-31a

Being Needy

Sharing our gifts

The human body is amazing! If you start looking up facts about it one will find talk about the different systems in the body, how many cells, how much of the body is made up of water, and on and on. Those who study the body, heal the body, and operate on the body are very knowledgeable individuals. For most of us we don't get too complicated unless dealing with illness, in which case you learn way more about your body than you may have ever wanted to know.

There is the song about Dem Bones. We can sing the toe bone connected to the foot bone, the foot bone connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone connected to the leg bone, and all the way up until we get to the shoulder, neck, and head bone. But for many of us the extent of our knowledge of the body is limited and pretty general considering how complex our bodies are.

In Apostle Paul's time there was a very limited understanding about the human body, but for all generations it has been very apparent just by looking at us that the body has a head, feet, hands, ears, eyes, nose, and private parts. Paul's use of the body for analogy is not unique for his time. Normally the analogy of the body has been used to show a hierarchy within the family unit, the organization of groups, or in government. The head of course always being considered the most important part of any organization.

This thinking is still prevalent in the world. We talk about the head of a company, the CEO, the head of government, the head of the church, and the head of the family. Each time we do so we mean that the person at the top has authority and some amount of autonomy as well as importance, that separates them from the rest of the group.

What was unique about Paul's use of the body for the analogy of the church is that in his writing no one part of the body is said to be more important than another. In fact, he makes sure that we are aware that the more private parts of the body are as important as the head. The parts we cover and treat with modesty are as integral to the whole body as the head, hands, and feet.

It was Paul's intention to make sure that people understood that the church was not going to be the church as it should be unless everyone, every part of the body, was seen and understood as necessary, needed, and valuable.

Now this passage comes right after the scripture about spiritual gifts and that each person is given gifts by the Holy Spirit for the common good of the whole. Paul

continues in this part of the reading to express just how important each person is to the whole saying that “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body” (12:18-20).

There are two points yet to make. Paul writes that “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (12:26). And that “[we] are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (12:17). Let’s unpack that a little, but looking first at the statement that we are the body, and yet individuals.

Take a look at your hand. You see there that you have individual fingers, each one important to your ability to write, grasp and manipulate items. Each finger serves a purpose. Still together with the palm and back of the hand we call it all the hand, and we are able to do much more with the whole hand than each finger can on its own. This does not lessen the importance of each finger but rather upholds the need for each finger in the work of the hand as a whole.

We are individuals here in the church. Each of us unique. Each of us with gifts that are ours that another does not have. We may share some gifts in common, but not one of us has every gift of the Spirit within us. Individually we have value and can do many things, but when we are brought together, we can do even more because it takes everyone to be the whole church.

You may believe that you only have a small part to play in the role of the church and it would not be noticed one way or another if you did not use your gifts. You are wrong. We may not yet even know what we are missing because you have hidden your gift. Tucked it away for fear that you will be called on to do more than you think you are able to do. But I tell you that we are not who we can be or are called to be without you.

You may not have a clue as to what you can do or what your gifts are. If so, take time to study the gifts, do a little homework, ask people what they see in you, or just take time for conversation and let people know that you are searching to understand how God has gifted you.

For those who know their gifts it is important to not see your gift as more important than another. Those who are expressive and well spoken or have power and prestige can easily be seen or thought of as more important than others. Paul warns us not to believe that of ourselves or of others. People with very discernable gifts that know how to use them must not be seen as more valuable to the whole than those who are still struggling to understand how God is using them for the good and strength of the whole.

You may also need to assess what you are doing in the church presently. If it does not bring you joy then maybe you are not using your gifts as God intended. Even if what you do is a lot of work it should be joyful work in the church. It may bring you joy to see a child’s face light up when you teach them, or to know people are satisfied because they

have been nourished through food and fellowship, or the music you share has lifted or comforted someone's spirit.

Maybe it is taking time after worship to count the offering and though done quietly and is not noticed by many, is still something you enjoy and you know is helpful to the whole. Maybe it is taking minutes or chairing a meeting, leading people in Bible or book study, organizing an event, making phone calls and writing cards. There is little in the world, work, or church that does not take some amount of effort. But even if difficult and at time challenging it should be joy-filled work because you know that you are using your gifts in a way that God intended.

What can be life-giving to the church is when someone comes forward with new ideas for both the work and/or worship of the church. The church was never meant to be unchanging. The church changes as people use their gifts, grow in faith, and in love of one another.

There is an African word that can be translated a number of ways. The word is Ubuntu. Translated it means humanity, but can be defined as meaning, "I am what I am because of who we all are." This captures the essence of Paul's letter to the Corinthians very nicely. As individuals we are what we are because of who we all are. As the church we are what we are because of who we all are. Further to that, as Paul wrote, if one suffers than the whole suffers together. If one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. We are to be so connected to one another that we suffer and rejoice together.

You are important, without you I cannot be who God intended me to be. Without each of us, the church will not and cannot be what God intended it to be. We are as connected as our breath which goes out from one person and is breathed in by another.

Know that you are a necessary part of the church and we will only be who we are supposed to be if each of us steps up and shares our gifts, time and energy, no matter how limited you may think that is. Let others encourage you, listen to you, and share in the life and work that God is calling us to in this day, in this place, and with each other.

The Holy Spirit is calling you. Listen to the voice of the Spirit in your heart and as revealed to you by others. Please don't ignore it. Don't be afraid or shy, lazy, or too proud. We need each other to be the whole body of Christ living, working, in our world. Thanks be to God. Amen.