

I need you. You need me. And we all need each other.

Because we're not a group of volunteers who happen to share the same religious interests. We're a body, connected mystically to Christ and to each other. You're linked up with me. I'm linked up to you. And we're all linked up with each other. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one body.

As members of Christ's grace-filled body, Paul insists that we have gifts. Nobody here has been left out. The Spirit has lavished on each of us gifts to strengthen the body. Some can teach; some can plot the course for the future; others know how to offer the touch of care. And those are only a few gifts. There are many more. What's yours? What's your gift in the body?

Paul lived in an age when egos often got in the way of appreciating all of God's gifts. Church folks sometimes got into spats over whose gift was the best. The believers who spoke in tongues, man, they thought they were about as special as you could get. But those who had the gift of healing begged to differ. So this group argued with that group. They fought and divided and said mean, half-true things about one another. Yeah, imagine that, in church.

But I'm convinced our problem is different from Paul's problem. Rather than fighting over whose gift is tops, many of us aren't sure we have gifts to offer at all. Maybe the pastor has gifts

for the body, and the associate pastor of community life, and the director of youth and children. They could all have gifts. But the rest of us? You may think that what you have to offer is not that critical to the life of the body.

Well, listen. Don't insult God, okay? Of course you have gifts. Meaningful, important gifts. Some of you can manage difficult interpersonal situations. Others can listen to people in need. Still others bring hope and joy by your calm, loving demeanor. We're a body, remember? Which means each member has a function, and each function contributes to the well-being of the whole. And when one member fails to function, the whole community suffers. Isn't that the way it works with a body?

Human bodies are amazing. God made them so complex and beautiful. Take our wrists, for example. We can move them this way, this way, this way and even this way. Take our brains, for another example, working all the time, even when we aren't aware, to keep our hearts pumping and organs functioning. The incredible human body! But there's a small gland around our Adam's apple that can throw off the whole operation. Some of you have lost the function of the thyroid or have had to have it removed. I think you would testify that after your surgery you immediately became worthless. For six weeks, or however long it took the medication to build up your system, you barely could get

out of bed. The thyroid isn't big. It would fit in a teaspoon. We never notice the thyroid. It hides under our skin. But no one with any sense would doubt its value. You may think you are small and don't matter, that you are nearly invisible. But oh yes, you have gifts. And the body needs your gifts to be well.

In 2015, a film came out starring Robert De Niro and Jane Hathaway, called *The Intern*. De Niro played a recovering widower who had grown tired of retirement. Hathaway was the owner of a booming online fashion business at which De Niro had been hired as an intern. The employees didn't cut the old codger much slack when he first began to work there. What good was a has-been intern? What tasks he got were piddling. For a while he sat and twiddled his thumbs.

But slowly, he began to make a difference. He had wisdom that some of the younger men needed: how to dress for success; how to admit you were wrong and say you're sorry; how never to leave before the boss does. He had compassion for the struggles others were facing, and personal discipline galore. The booming business was straining when he arrived, but after several weeks, old messes were cleaned up, anxiety was down among employees and the boss was learning there's more to life than being the boss.

Do you think an old codger can make that much difference?
I do. It just takes a few gifts. A few gifts brought to the right body

of people, and the whole system gets new life. You need me. I need you. We all need each other in the body of Christ.

What are your gifts? Some of us know without even asking. But others of us are still trying to figure it out. I understand that. Several years ago, churches produced spiritual gift inventories designed to help us identify what our gifts might be. Some inventories were simple, others complex, but a lot of folks were at least pointed in the right direction by these inventories. If you are struggling to name your gifts, you're not the only one. You may not know until you jump in somewhere and see what happens. You may have to jump in several somewheres before you find your unique place in the body.

Our church in Owensboro wasn't quite large enough to have a youth leader on staff when I was attending around 1980. So the youth group always relayed on adult lay leaders. Church members weren't exactly lining up at the door to serve as youth leaders, and there was usually a general panic at some point in July over who would be willing to take on the job for the coming year beginning in the fall. Our youth group burned out several recruits, God bless them. But the leaders most vivid in my memory were Steve and Marla Estes. They had moved from central Kentucky, a small town called Magnolia, and the Christian Education committee was quick to hone in on naïve, new blood.

Steve and Marla didn't think of themselves as youth group leaders. Who knows why they said yes? But they enriched the whole church when they did. Flashy? No. Caring? Yes. And trustworthy, open, willing to laugh, gracious. Pay attention to that word. Gracious, as if the grace we see in Jesus was flowing from God through them to us. When they looked us in the eyes, it felt like they were part of us and we were part of them. Steve and Marla wouldn't have thought of themselves as youth ministers. That's why, to figure out your gifts, sometimes you just have to jump in and see.

Of course, some of us here have done that very thing. We have dipped our toes in several areas of ministry, and we're still not sure where we fit. If I'm describing you, don't let your heart be troubled. When we can't name our gifts, if we're never sure of the tasks that are ours to perform, rely on this: you're the gift. Just by being present and relating to others, you bless the body. Just by coming to worship and connecting, you enrich the whole. Maybe the list of gifts Paul names – leader, teacher, prophet – or the list of tasks on the time and talent sheet won't ever resonate with you. But you are no less important. We need you, and let me be bold to say, you need us. That's the way it works in the body of Christ.

I'm not a Greek scholar, but I did some checking on some of the words Paul uses in the 12th chapter of Romans to make sure

my memory was accurate. In fact, there is a tight connection between the words 'grace' and 'gift'. When Paul speaks of the grace given to him in verse 3, the word he uses is 'charisto.' When he speaks of the gifts given to us, he uses the word 'charismata.' At the heart of each word is 'charis,' the Greek word for God's undeserved favor. Paul goes on and on about God's undeserved favor in the first 11 chapters of Romans, shown to us most clearly in the self-giving of Jesus Christ on the cross. And as he turns to speak of our response to God's undeserved favor, he's still speaking the language of 'charis' or 'inexplicable divine favor.'

So God gives us this gift of undeserved love in Jesus, 'charis.' And with this undeserved love, come 'charismata', gifts of love we can share with others. So we have all of this freely offered, freely received 'charis' flowing among us. We're not held together by a rigid set of beliefs to which we all must adhere, though some beliefs are crucial. We're not held together because of shared political persuasions or because we look, dress and talk alike. What's holding us together, bone to bone, skin to flesh, is our gift from God and our gifts toward each other. Our unity is not uniformity, but a love that knows the need for difference and brings differences together in harmony.

What is your gift? You may not know. Then again, I have hope. I hope that all of us will find our place in the body, that we

will give in love whatever gifts we have to give, and in the giving we will enrich each other and become together a body that looks and acts like Jesus.

Not long ago, I was talking to a church member, who will remain anonymous. She said to me, "There are a lot of things I can't do very well for the church." I think she meant things like teaching, visiting and maybe serving in a soup kitchen. "But," she said, "I can do this." And boy, does she ever. She has found her niche and has thrown herself energies into it. And you may not know how, but we're all richer for it.

You need them. They need you. And all of us need each other. That's the way it is in the mystical body of Christ. Know your gift, and give it.