

“Striving for the Greater Gifts”

I Corinthians 12:14-21; I Corinthians 12:27-31

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 13, 2015 – 16th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

I've always been fascinated with sea travel, especially the large cruise ships that ply the America-to-Europe routes or go island hopping in the Caribbean. Many of them are really floating cities that offer almost all the comforts you'd expect to find ashore, only with better entertainment and scenery.

These giants of the sea date back more than a century when water travel was the only way between many destinations and people sought a more pleasant way to make these long voyages. The new liners both reduced the crossing time and provided a great adventure. Passengers used the time on shipboard to advance their reading, their tans, or their romance.

Do you remember that classic film, *An Affair to Remember*? Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr meet unexpectedly crossing the Atlantic and, before they get to New York, their life course has been set. Now on a jumbo jet they would hardly have had time to say hello, but a ship allowed an affair of the heart to take root and bloom.

A few years before this movie Mrs. Aleda Warren of Princeton, N. J. booked first class passage on the Queen Mary, sailing out of New York on January 23, 1952. The ports of landing for the Queen Mary were Cherbourg and then Southampton. There were more than a thousand on board, but anybody who was anybody, or who could afford to pretend that they were, went first class. The passenger list for that level numbered about three hundred, including Mrs. Warren. You can take a look at some of these items from her on display today in the Education Entryway.

If you had been aboard with her you might have found yourself seated at dinner with Ambassador William Draper or with the Countess of Gainsborough. You could rub shoulders with Mrs. Christian Herter or Christopher Soames, Member of Parliament. If these folks didn't suit your fancy, you could always look for Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Hardy and Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Laurel who were travelling together. Perhaps you might come up and introduce yourself to your most noted shipmate of all, the Right Honorable Winston Churchill.

On Sunday you could have dined from a selection of entrees including: Long Island Scallops, Breast of Lamb, Prime Rib of Beef, Steak with Sauce Béarnaise, or Stuffed Duckling. Of course there would be hors d'oeuvres, soup and salad courses, cheese and crackers, dessert, and after dinner liquors. You were guaranteed not to go away hungry. Later you could take a leisurely walk on deck and then return to the main lounge for dancing. I'm ready to go. How about you?

Actually the passengers on the voyage didn't have to be cooperative, just civil. Everything was done for them by plan. It was the crew that made the whole operation work. They were carefully selected, well-trained, and solicitous in even the smallest detail. Whatever the crew

thought about each other or the passengers, they had to put all that aside or the whole enterprise would fail. They had to work together, from Captain down to room boy, or no one would ever book passage again.

Each had a job to do or there would be a price to pay, not just in inconvenience but in safety, not just in ordinary circumstances but in the unexpected as well. There were no expendable positions on board and any absence or failure would have some effect. The two doctors on ship were there as much to keep the crew functioning as to reassure the passengers. You can also consider the challenge of sea travel in terms of the ship itself. It's an amazing floating world, but only because great care is taken to make it that way. A million parts have to fit together to make a ship seaworthy. They all contribute to the buoyancy, the forward motion, or the ambience that is characteristic of such super liners.

Certainly the engine is of extreme importance, but without other parts it would just sink in the water. You can't have a ship without a propeller, but alone it too would sink. The beds in the staterooms and the tables in the dining room are indispensable, but throw any of them into the water by themselves and they will go down to the bottom of the sea. Ditto for the ballroom chandeliers, the grand staircase, or the warming ovens in the kitchen. Alone, none of these items could take the anxious tourist even a foot closer to her destination; together they can transport thousands in comfort and in style.

Our familiar New Testament passage today is reminiscent of such maritime logic. Paul, too, was a frequent traveler and often moved about on boats as he went around the Mediterranean. I suppose he could as easily given an example about ship parts working together for the common good. Instead, though, Paul uses the body as an illustration of what he wanted to convey. This would be understandable to whoever might hear his words.

He said, "Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts. In the same way all of us, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into the one body by the same Spirit.

"For the body itself is not made up of only one part, but of many parts. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I don't belong to the body,' that would not keep it from being a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I don't belong to the body,' that would not keep it from being a part of the body.

"If the whole body were just an eye, how could it hear? And if it were only an ear, how could it smell? As it is, however, God put every different part in the body just as he wanted it to be. As it is, there are many parts but one body. [Don't you therefore see that] all of you are Christ's body, and each one is a part of it."

In my first church I found there was one couple who held twelve separate positions between them. He was president of the church and chairman of the Men's Fellowship. She was treasurer, church school superintendent, and choir director. The list went on from there. Despite their key roles, and the effort they gave, it didn't eliminate the need for others to participate. The couple did a lot, perhaps too much, but they could never do all that was needed.

A congregation is everyone and the sum total of all. It is a unique combination of skills and talents and interests. Yet it is only as strong in service as its members are individually. What we accomplish in our worship and ministries will depend greatly on our work and God's grace. How meaningful this worship is today has much to do with those who sing or play or read or usher or preach. In a congregation you need the involvement of each and every person to advance its work forward.

This morning we also have an opportunity to remember the wider dimensions of Paul's words. For as easily as his "parts of the body" illustration fits the local church, they also apply to the Church Universal as well. All those who profess Jesus' name are linked together regardless of denomination or location or language. A Baptist can't say to a Methodist "I don't have need of you," nor can a Brazilian Christian say to a German follower, "I don't have need of you." They, and we, are all parts of one body.

In practical terms it's not possible to become actively involved with every aspect of the wider church. So what we do is realize and live out our association with other Presbyterian congregations locally and globally. We participate with them in planning and carrying out mission for the good of all. From here we also reach out to further expressions of Christ's Church.

What does it matter if some congregations serve communion every week and we only periodically? Does it really cause a problem that we baptize by the laying on of hands dipped in water and they by immersion? We worship the same God and proclaim the same Good News. They're committed folks and so are we.

Together we can do some things that we couldn't do alone or as well. For example, we share a common food pantry with our friends at Smoky Row Brethren. Other churches join in as well. Do we all need to set up small and struggling efforts in our own buildings? Would that really serve our community better to be so fragmented? By joining together where practical we celebrate a partnership that is both actual and symbolic.

Paul ends his Corinthian passage by citing some of the typical gifts that individual parts of the body might be able to offer, like teaching and preaching and healing. Then he says, "Strive for the greater gifts, and I will show you a still more excellent way." That reminds us that no matter how much we do as a congregation or as a partnership, there are still greater dimensions that we're only beginning to touch. They are still ahead in the future.

Jesus calls us to ministry in his name, and as we engage in it together, we discover how it opens up life for us personally as well. God gives us the gift of each other and, as we in turn share those strengths, we become strengthened ourselves. We find resources for living and working that we couldn't find in isolation.

You can walk the path of faith alone, and some do, but Paul tells us it's more meaningful, more productive, and considerably more enjoyable, with companions along for the journey. Today Highlands Church is us, all of us together, but we only have power for our calling if we give Christ the central place among us.