Sermon, January 2025
"We Are the Body"
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine
Annual Meeting Sunday
Delivered by the Rev. John Balicki

206, 600, 78, 100,000, 9,000 Hike! Oh, right, that's later this afternoon. These numbers have another meaning: 206 bones, 600 muscles, 78 organs, 100,000 hairs on our head (well at least some do or did), and 9,000 taste buds. How vast and complex is the human body.

It is a certainty that the Apostle Paul writing around the year 53 CE had little knowledge of these exact numbers. Yet Paul understood the complexity of the body and he understood a couple of important anatomical principles: "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it". How true: think about a bit of dust in your eye or a tiny wood splinter in your finger. And the other is how all the members of the body need to work together for the body to function well. The poet and songwriter James Weldon Johnson might have said it best in his spiritual, "Dem Bones". *Toe bone connected to the foot bone Foot bone connected to the heel bone, . . .*

Why did Paul give this rather long lesson on anatomy? Because this new community of Christians at Corinth thought some members were more important than others. Can you believe it? Some thought they were better because they were of a higher class in society, or they gave more to the church or they did more in the church; some didn't really care about those who were hungry.

What a wonderful epistle for Annual Meeting Sunday when we reflect on our life together as the Episcopal people of God in Wilton, Maine. We are part of a body; we are connected. We're connected even when one leaves us as we dedicate this Sunday and our Annual Meeting to John and Kathryn Sytsma.

And that's our whole reason for being here as church. You can stay home and listen to better sermons, you can find the most glorious choral music on your own, you can pray on your own maybe with less distraction, you can do yoga and tai chi and other spiritual practices and those are all good things to do but something very important would be missing and that would be . . .

EACH OTHER! We by joining together can do immeasurably more in the world by joining together. And while at times we may annoy and infuriate each other, we also deeply enrich one another. We have just passed our annual commemoration in both nation and church of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and he wrote a challenging letter from a Birmingham prison cell to white clergy who had criticized him:

"In a real sense all life is inter-related. All people are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...This is the inter-related structure of reality."

The words of Dr. King as well as Paul's epistle subvert some of our dearest American heresies. Among them are the varieties of "Jesus and me" theologies which are very popular today in the charismatic evangelical world. All that's important is accepting Christ, and once you've done that, you're good for life and better than anyone who hasn't. That kind of thinking denies the corporate nature of salvation. Kind of Marlboro Man theology – I'm just fine on my own thank you just get the government out of the way and let me worship Christ and it makes no difference who I run over on the way to church or how many hungry people are along the side of the road as long as I get there.

And the image I want to focus on of the body this year is our stained glass window above the altar created by none other than our own John Sytsma. Now I will confess in front of you all that I haven't paid too much attention to this window in the two plus years I've been here. Maybe because I'm facing all of you and you're facing the window. Take a look at that window and let's see what it tells us. It's a wonderful summary of today's epistle, "in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body", and we all have gifts, there are tongues of fire over everyone's head; and look at all the varieties of people in the window; we believe in diversity, equity and inclusion despite the recent efforts of the Trump administration. And look the animals are represented: the moose, the beaver, the goose, we are a Church that believes in Creation Care despite the recent efforts of the Trump administration to destroy it. So here we are togther and each stewardship season, each annual meeting, are times when we reflect not just on how much I get out of St. Luke's, but what we get from each other, and what we give to each other.

Which brings us to the gospel where the people of Nazareth had to make an important decision. Jesus presents himself as the fulfillment of all of Israel's hopes. In his person. And all the people go, "Huh!!. Joe and Mary's boy?" And how does Jesus respond? Jesus insults his crowd, asserting that he won't be able to minister with healing power in his hometown. Why? Perhaps because they think they know him too well? Perhaps because they want the gifts he will bring all for themselves and not for outsiders? He gives examples of Gentiles who responded to God's actions when Jews did not: the widow in Sidon and Naaman the Syrian. And this creates tension right there in the hometown synagogue.

And that's another reason we need each other because we are entering times of tension as a church in our country. When the Archbishop of Washington, Maryann Budde, preached at the national prayer service the morning after the inauguration, she spoke directly to the President but said nothing more than what we heard from our Scriptures this morning:

that we are all interconnected and need to care for the most unfortunate in our midst, that the Spirit anointed Jesus to bring good news to the poor, not to the oligarchs but to the poor! Amazing. And for preaching from the Scriptures, our Bishop has received death threats and we need to pray for her safety. Jesus escaped the crowd that wanted to throw him off a cliff. He passes mysteriously through the midst of them. The good news is we can't get rid of him so easily.

Today's account of the Lord's rejection is one of the sharpest rebukes found in Scripture. Ironically, the volatile rejection occurs from within an assembly of worship. These don't seem to be bad people. But they are people who have made up their own agenda for what God is to do among them. Each minute, each hour, each day, each year, we are called to be open to God's Spirit in our midst, in our lives, in our Church. Can we be open to the Spirit? Can we be open to each other?