Although the month of January is quickly dissipating, we are still in the season when people are trying to keep their New Year’s resolutions -- still trying to lose weight, stop smoking, improve their temperament, and so on. Those efforts are worthy aims and we hope that many folks are successful in accomplishing their goals.

Today’s scripture reminds me of another category of self-improvement that is also a sought-after target this time of year – getting into better physical shape. With the pandemic, things have changed, but not really slowed down. Sales of home exercise equipment, for example, are actually up, and gym memberships are starting to recover after many gyms had to close in 2020. Sales of dietary supplements are also up. Furthermore, there is a new phenomenon that may be the wave of the future in exercise and body building – hybrid workouts. The way this works is that the person who is enrolled at the gym goes there in person during the times convenient for that, but when it is not easy to get to the gym, the person stays home and receives workout instructions there via live streaming on line.

But even with the fancy technology, there is still one impediment to being successful in getting into shape by exercising and eating in a healthy manner. Let’s call it the human factor. Sometimes temptation dogs us and we find it hard to change habits. Here are some examples from Reader’s Digest: My brain says “crunches” but my stomach auto-corrects it to “cupcakes”. What is a man’s idea of a balanced diet? A beer (cheeseburger?) in each hand.

This week, we are also concerned about body building, but of a different type. We are not talking about barbells, bench presses, and treadmills, nor of special diets and food supplements. No, we are speaking of a special body that we are part of as the Church – the Body of Christ.

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a NIV**

**Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body-- whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free-- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. 14 Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.**

As in last week’s sermon, we are reading from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians; today’s scripture is a follow-up to last week’s. Corinth at this time was a bustling port city on the Mediterranean Sea. Sailing ships came into port frequently, and they would bring with them exotic goods, people of various nationalities, and the latest news about what was happening throughout the Empire. They considered themselves sophisticated and cosmopolitan. But they faced a problem similar to what we have had to deal with as a country. That is, how do you handle diversity? How do people of varying backgrounds – Jews, Gentiles, slave, free, etc. – find areas of common interest and benefit? Paul introduces here an answer to the people by using the analogy of the body.

Our human bodies are made of parts, Paul notes, even though the body is one unit. That is all well and good, but how do the parts come together to do the work of the one body?

**15 Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.**

We remember that Paul’s goal here is to make the Corinthians understand their connection to each other using this figure of the body. If one part of the body says it is no longer connected to the rest, even though it clearly is, that is foolishness. Paul then uses some elementary logic on them. If you claim that you are not part of the body because you are different than the other parts, you are really missing the point. God put the parts of the body together just as they are supposed to be, with each part having a function. How can you have a body if all the parts of it are the same? The whole point of a body is that all the parts work together, with each part contributing to the functioning of the whole.

We can only imagine what was going on in the Corinthian church at that time. Perhaps some groups in the church were looking to split off from the main church. Maybe they were feeling left out of the life of the church because they didn’t have certain skills or spiritual gifts. But Paul disabuses them of this line of thinking.

**19 If they were all one part, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many parts, but one body. 21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" 22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, 24 while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, 25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.**

Now Paul steps up the rhetoric. Not only do all the parts of the body work together for the good of the whole body, they need each other to do this. A hand cannot function if there is no eyesight to guide it, and the foot doesn’t know where to go until the brain (head) tells it to.

Then Paul points out another important fact about how the church works together. The parts of the body that some folks dismiss as unimportant are in fact very important. Just because we don’t see them, we cannot make the mistake of ignoring them.

This last week, I watched a TV show about the Anchorage, Alaska airport and the challenges they face in operating in that remote and physically challenging environment. In one of their stories, they had a problem with an Alaska Airlines jet; the pilots on landing heard some noises coming from the landing gear compartment. Upon landing, the jet was taken directly to the hangars Every hour that a jet is out of commission costs thousands of dollars so they got to work right away.

What they discovered was that the whole situation originated with a failed bushing, a simple little piece (like a washer) that costs about $2. But they didn’t have the part in stock and had to have it shipped up from Seattle. The whole episode cost the airline about a quarter of a million dollars. Although the bushing was humble, small, and an inexpensive part of the aircraft, it was nevertheless part of the aircraft and crucial to the operating of the landing gear. If the bushing had not been attended to, the landing gear could have failed, with disastrous consequences.

**26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28 And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?****31 Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way.**

Paul continues on with the connectedness issue. If one part of the body is hurting, it is not alone, for the rest of the body hurts with it. And similarly, if one part of the body is feeling good (“rejoicing”), the rest of the body joins in the happiness. And this is his segue into his big conclusion – you people, all of you, are the body of Christ. Note something here. Paul does not say that you are “kind of like” the body of Christ, “sort of like”, “almost like” it. No, you, the Church (with a capital “C”) are the body of Christ.

Then Paul starts in with the rhetorical questions. Is everyone an apostle? A prophet, a teacher, and so on? No; no one person is all things. But that’s why we’re the body of Christ. Together, we are able to do more than we are as individuals.

Yes, this time of year, we are often concerned with building our physical bodies. That is all well and good, but even more important is for us to build our spiritual bodies – to get our “spiritual parts” into shape. As diverse people, we find unity in the body of Christ. Therefore, let’s work on our body building and bringing all of us together. As Paul says in a previous chapter of this book, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. (1Corinthians 9:24 NIV)” In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.