

## SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

### *Community in Christ*

1 Corinthians 12:12-26

July 13, 2025

Scripture shapes individuals, and it also shapes Christian community, the church. Paul writes, "There are many members yet one body." He offers us a vision of the church that, like a human body, is made up of many parts, each with different form and function, each with different placement and purpose, each worthy on its own and each vital to the whole.

When I occasionally get asked about how I ended up in ministry, the truest answer is this: I was baptized at First Presbyterian Church of Ocala, Florida, and the body of Christ at this church, my home church, was faithful to the promises they made at my baptism.

You know, that question we answer each and every time we witness a baptism right here on these chancel steps: "Do we, as members of the church of Jesus Christ and representatives of this congregation, promise to guide and nurture this child by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging her to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful member of the church?"

This question gets asked at every baptism at every Presbyterian church, and it is never just a formality. On the day of my baptism, the saints at First Presbyterian Church of Ocala were asked this very question and they said yes. I have no memory of this, I was just a baby — but they said yes, and they meant it.

They guided and nurtured me, teaching me the faith in Sunday School and summers of VBS. I knew their love in hugs and smiles, and through the faces that would beam at me as I sang in the children's choir. They taught me the sweetness of Christian community through bread and juice served in tiny little cups during communion, and through the other sacred feast, donuts and juice during coffee hour.

As a very young child and as I grew, I knew I was safe at church. I knew I was loved by all of these people, some of whom I knew, some of whom I didn't. But they knew me, and through their love I came to know that God loved me.

At my baptism, they said yes, and they meant it. What a gift.

There's a special place in heaven for youth leaders, I know that now. As a middle schooler and high schooler I loved going to youth group and being with my friends, but it wasn't only about being with my peers. The adult leaders made youth group the fun, safe, joyful place that it was. I think of people like Shannon, Rod and Linda, Darrel, Rusty, Lindsay, and others who gave of their time faithfully every week to come and hang out with a bunch of middle and high schoolers. They were busy people. Most of them had jobs. But they regularly spent hours of their time with us, they took us on youth retreats and mission trips, they gave of their time so that we had a consistent place to come where we knew we were loved by God and by them.

Because of those youth leaders, youth group was a place of refuge in some obvious ways, as middle and high schoolers dealing with the pressures of the teenage years and in some not-so-obvious ways. There were those among us who weren't so sure about our faith but came every week because it was a solid meal and a place of physical safety. There were those among us who didn't have safe adults at home, or who were living in households in the grips of addiction. There were those among us struggling with mental health issues, with depression, with eating disorders.

I now know enough to know that these kids weren't just in my youth group; they're in every youth group. God bless the people who give of their time to be a consistent, loving presence in the lives of our children. It makes a difference.

It is the promises of baptism lived out. It is Christ's body alive, a community of love, witness, and mutual care.

My home church's faithfulness in the promises that they made at my baptism taught me what it means to be church and inspired in me a deep belief in what Christ's body, the church, can do and be in the world.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we hear good news for each one of us: that through baptism, we are made members of one body. It's not through a test, or how worthy or good we are. Through baptism, we are made members of one body, Christ's body. Each part different, each part necessary. Each unique and yet part of a magnificent whole.

Episcopal priest Dr. Raewynne Whiteley writes, "We come to the water of baptism as individuals, independent and relatively self-contained. We come [away from] that water changed. Our identity is no longer solitary; we can no longer truly be known without reference to that community into which we have been incorporated: the body of Christ, the church. After baptism, we are more than just ourselves; we are by definition beings-in-relationship."

But there is a tension here. Dr. Whiteley continues, "As far as 1 Corinthians is concerned, there is no belonging without participating. That abrogates the nature of the body...belonging is not a one-sided affair. We are given the gift of belonging at baptism, but we are also signing up for the responsibility of functioning as part of the body of Christ" (281).

Belonging is a gift. And it is also a responsibility.

Paul's metaphor of the one body is simple, but we all know there is nothing simple about the kind of belonging he describes.

This type of belonging asks us to be who we are, because whether we are a foot or an ear or a nose, the body needs us to be that thing. There is such vulnerability in being ourselves, and in sharing our truest and deepest selves with one another and with the world.

The kind of belonging Paul describes asks us to care for and honor other members: their being, their contributions, and their needs. This might mean re-examining long-held beliefs and prejudices. It might mean creating space for difference, growing in humility, and turning away from the desire to know it all or to be right.

This type of belonging asks us to care for and honor the whole: giving what we are able to contribute, prioritizing the body's health, wholeness, and witness above our personal priorities, desires, and goals. Sacrificing our time. Giving of our resources.

Through baptism, God gives us the gift of belonging. Our belonging to the body of Christ never changes and can never be taken away. Even if we move away or change congregations, we belong to the body of Christ.

What can change and hopefully does change is our own understanding of our belonging, and the way we engage our belonging.

I'll share one way this has evolved in my life:

As a young child at First Presbyterian of Ocala, I was taught the importance of generosity. In fact there was one Sunday that the pastor of my childhood, Dr. Ray Ruark, sat all of us children down on the chancel steps. He held up a dollar and taught us that we should give part of every dollar to the church. This was what it meant to show our gratitude to God, and to be part of God's work through the church. I took the lesson quite literally and proceeded to go home, pull the few dollar bills out of my piggy bank, and rip a piece off of each one to give to the church.

I understood that giving was good, and over the years, I would bring some money to church to place in the offering plate. But my understanding of my own belonging and my responsibility to the community would continue to grow.

I was now a young adult, in my early twenties. The pastor of my childhood had retired several years before and we had a new pastor, Dr. Raymond Guterman. By now I had sensed God calling me to ministry and I was preparing to go to seminary. Our new pastor, Dr. Guterman, invited me

to lunch so that we could get to know each other a bit. In that conversation he named my home church's promise to pray for me, and their desire to tangibly support my seminary education. In that spirit he shared the news that the Session had voted to send me a \$100 check each month to be used for whatever I needed: books, my cell phone bill, groceries. They knew seminary was expensive and they wanted to help lighten the load.

I was grateful, although not surprised, at the generosity of my home church and their desire to keep fulfilling their baptismal promises to me.

What was a little surprising was what came next. Dr. Guterman continued, "Now Madison, I know this might sound a little funny to you, but I would like to make a request. We're sending you this money each month, and I'm going to ask that you send some back, even if it's just \$10. It's important for you and important for us to know that we are supporting each other in ministry. We're invested in your success and your preparation for ministry, and it will mean a lot for folks here in Ocala to know that you are invested in our ministry."

This is not exactly how I expected the conversation to go, and while I didn't say this to him, I did think it was a little silly for them to send me a \$100 check only for me to send them back a \$10 check – couldn't they just send me a check for \$90 and we could call it a day? But over time I came to see the brilliance and the deep faithfulness in his words.

Here's what happened: Every month during my three years at Louisville Seminary, First Presbyterian Church of Ocala would send me a check for \$100. And because I didn't trust myself to write and mail a check every month, I set up a \$10 monthly autopay to first Presbyterian Church of Ocala. Even though I wasn't physically touching it, that simple practice, and that small amount of money, gave my gratitude somewhere to go. I'd see the \$10 debit come up on my checking account statement and I'd be reminded from across the miles, "I belong to those people, and they belong to me." I'd think about their ministries — ministries that I had personally witnessed, participated in, and benefited from — and I'd feel the joy

of knowing the good things I was supporting. On good days, I'd be nudged to pray for them. On hard days, I'd be reminded of my connection to this group of people who believed in me and sent me with their blessing.

I had belonged to the church my whole life and only then did I understand that real belonging costs something. Not in the way of a cost of admission, and not always in the sense of money. Belonging means participating. Dr. Guterman taught me that I belonged to the body of Christ at First Presbyterian of Ocala even if I wasn't physically there. He taught me that they needed me, that the church couldn't faithfully do their ministry without me. He opened the door for me to engage in the spiritual practice of giving in a way that I had never done before. I was no longer giving just when I happened to be sitting in church and happened to have a few dollars to place in the offering plate. Now I was giving like it mattered. On a schedule! It was only \$10, but it was what I could spare at the time, and I continue to learn the immeasurable spiritual value of that practice and the seeds that Dr. Guterman planted at lunch that day.

Through baptism, we belong to the body of Christ. This is a gift we are given, and a responsibility we share. By the grace of God, our understanding of that gift and responsibility continues to grow and evolve.

One day several years ago I was going over our family budget, and I had a sudden realization. By this time, I had shifted my giving from First Presbyterian of Ocala here to Second, and I had worked over the years to steadily increase my monthly giving as I was able. On this particular day, several years ago, the numbers on the spreadsheet jumped out at me in way that I couldn't unsee: our family was spending more on lawn care than we were giving to the church!

This hit me as a sort of spiritual crisis: didn't I care more about Christ's mission in this place than about the mulching of my flower beds?!

At that stage in my journey of faith, I could see clearly that my priorities were out of line. Our family budget wasn't telling the right story. We weren't going to give up

caring for our yard, but we needed to make some shifts to our overall budget so that the allocation of our family's resources better reflected the commitment of our faith.

By God's grace, my understanding of belonging had evolved. My understanding of what it means to be responsible for and to Christ's body, the church had grown, and it continues to grow.

I wonder: What does it mean to you to belong to the body of Christ, and to the congregation of Second Presbyterian Church?

In what ways do you experience the joy of belonging? What kind of responsibility do you feel to and for this community?

Are you an ear? A hand? A foot? How can we better see and celebrate you in your ear-ness, or your foot-ness? What did being a hand mean to you 10 years ago, 5 years ago – what does it mean now? What might it mean in the future?

I shared with you my own journey around the spiritual practice of giving, and how that has been a helpful lens for me to understand the evolution of my own belonging. But there are many other measures.

Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

One question we might ask ourselves is, "To what extent am I aware of the sufferings and the joys of others in my church family?" Or, "How much are others aware of my sufferings and joys?" If the answer is 'not very,' perhaps this is an invitation to pursue greater connection.

Another question we might ask ourselves is, "When is the last time another member of the body taught me something new, or changed my mind about something?"

"Which members of the body have we intentionally or unintentionally dishonored or excluded?"

"How can I contribute to the health and wholeness of Christ's body?"

Friends, know this: through your baptism, you belong. You, in all your uniqueness and imperfection, in all your quirks and gifts, you belong to Christ's body. You are needed within Christ's body. We are Christ's body, together.

Let us receive that gift with thanksgiving, and let us feel the joyful weight of our own calling, of our own participation in the body, in and through Christ, so that our life together will make Christ visible for one another and the world. Amen.