Ladders

Sermon
Rev. Rebecca Clancy
I Corinthians 12:7-26

The phrase "glass ceiling" was first coined in the mid-eighties to describe the invisible barrier that prevented women from climbing the corporate ladder. The phrase so resonated with corporate women that it instantly became part of the American lexicon. And there's good reason it resonated. In the mid-sixties, the Civil Rights Act had outlawed sexual discrimination in the work force. Yet twenty years later, 97% of the senior managers of Fortune 1000 companies were still white men.

Before long, various ethnicities – like African Americans and Hispanics -- with whom the phrase also resonated -- laid claim to it. The phrase eventually made the powers that be in corporate America, whether in sympathy or not, a great deal more vigilant about the tacit discrimination it was practicing in violation of federal law. Well and good. Discrimination of any kind is indeed felonious.

But there is another kind of glass ceiling out there that is rather less culpable. It exists not just in the corporate world, but in the larger workforce as well. You could even say it overhangs all of larger society.

For who of us has really climbed as high as we had first hoped we would in life? As children we dreamed of becoming movie stars or rock stars or athletic stars, and as we reached young adulthood, those dreams didn't disappear entirely. They only attenuated. We still hoped to make

a big mark, to cut a wide swath, to make a big splash, in whatever endeavors we had chosen to pursue – to be distinguished, recognized, successful, and renown – to climb high on the ladder.

But then we bumped against some kind of a barrier. At first it was invisible, but as we bumped against it again and again and again, the smudges we made on it made it visible. *It was the barrier of our own limitations*. We didn't climb as high as we first hoped we would in life because whatever talent, whatever skill, whatever drive we had just weren't sufficient. We were outdone by the competition. We just weren't the stuff of it.

We tended, however, to take it philosophically. We were not consumed by bitterness or jealousy. We did not shake our fist at God. Sure, we were a bit disappointed, but we came to terms with it. Who really wants to climb higher than our limitations allow, after all? That's only a recipe for failure. It sure didn't do King Saul any good. Better stuck in middle management than run through by your own sword on Mt. Gilboa. And so, our disappointment gave way to resignation. We stopped trying to climb up, and instead we soldiered forward.

At any event, in *this* case the glass ceiling is not to blame. And we can't blame ourselves either really. I am not to blame because I'm not Martin Luther. It's no one's fault. It's just life, I guess.

I suppose that now would be a good time to segue into the topic of Christian humility, now that I've just given grounds for it. And it's a good Lenten topic. But unfortunately I can't. The apostle Paul won't permit it.

The apostle Paul in this morning's epistle lesson addressed himself to a society of ladder climbers. One tried to climb the ladder through wisdom, another through knowledge, another through healing -- another prophecy, another tongues, and another interpretation of tongues. Paul made it amply clear in his *oh so direct way* that all these ladder climbers were subject to the same limitations than we are, but because Paul's society was a *church* society, the glass ceiling was not as low as it is in larger society.

Let's face it, the glass ceiling is pretty high in a church society. A church society is a much less cut throat, much less dog eat dog society, than larger society. Karen's standards for admission to the choir, for example, are somewhat less rigorous than the Lyric Opera's, and Lynnly's standards for admission to the Properties Board are non-existent.

And so because the glass ceiling was so high, because they didn't bump against it as quickly as they would have in larger society, the ladder climbers began to race each other up the ladder. The race produced competition and competition produced division.

Paul of course saw exactly what was going on and put a stop to it. Don't think of church society as a ladder, he wrote. Think of it as a body. Think of it as a body of which you are all a member. And face it, he wrote, despite the ladder race a church society may allow, not all are heads and hearts. Heads and hearts are few and far between. Most, rather, are less honorable members -- ears and eyes, or knees and elbows, hands and feet, and some less honorable than that.

But it doesn't matter, he wrote, it's no cause for disappointment, because all the members of the body are indispensible to it. *"If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be….If all were a single member, where would the body be?" All* the members are indispensible to it, the less honorable often enough all the more indispensable.

Once Paul demanded that his church society think of itself as a body, it was all good news from there, and it is good news that applies to us as well. It is the news that within any church society, no matter our limitations, we have no cause for disappointment at our limitations. Rather, we have cause for celebration, because we are all necessary and valuable. We are all just as he wrote – indispensable.

This underscores the greatness and truthfulness of church society, but surely, when we move from the church society to larger society, we may see ourselves in the same light. From where ever we have bumped our heads on the glass ceiling of our own limitations, from whatever capacity we are bound to contribute to larger society, we are all still necessary and valuable, even indispensable. And more important than seeing *ourselves* in this light, we may we see others. In this way we enable not only church society but larger society to be the society God intends. Amen.