

What's All This Talk About Gifts?

I Corinthians 12:1-13

January 24, 2010

Our Board of Trustees recently decided that it was time to increase the security around the church. We'll be adding sensors on all the doors and some additional motion detectors. We don't want to do it – we wish we didn't have to do it – but, we have finally had to accept that the day and age we live in makes it necessary.

A large downtown church in Youngstown had to do something about their security a few years back. They fixed the windows on the lower level so they wouldn't open. They installed deadbolt locks on all the doors that could only be unlocked with a key from the inside. The only outside door they left unlocked during the day was the one closest to the office area. They locked it also as soon as the workday was over.

One morning when the custodian arrived for work he discovered a broken kitchen window. It appeared to have been broken from the inside. The staff called the police. Later in the day an officer stopped by to let them know that he had stopped a 12-year-old boy the previous night who had been behaving rather suspiciously around the building. He told the staff that he went to see the boy after hearing about the broken window and the boy admitted that he had been in the building looking around. The officer suspected that the boy was looking for something to steal. Apparently what had happened was that when the boy got ready to leave, the staff had already left for the day and had locked the door, locking him on the inside. And so, he broke the window to get out.

Some of the members of the church arrived for a meeting while the police officer was still there and heard about the incident. One of the members commented that he thought charges should be filed. One of the women at the meeting asked the officer what he knew about the boy's background. The officer shared that it was his understanding that the boy came from a poor family, had no father in the home and had never been in trouble with the law before. The woman asked the staff not to press charges and give her some time to propose some other solutions. The staff agreed.

The following Sunday, the woman went to her Sunday School class and told them the situation. Then she asked them if they would take up a collection so she could purchase a YMCA membership for the boy with so he would have a positive place to spend his free time. She also encouraged the class to reach out to the boy's family. The class did both.

Now, I'm guessing numerous sermons had been preached in that church over the years about compassion, mercy, and loving one's neighbor. It took someone acting out of their gift of compassion for the connection to happen between the sermons and the stranger who got locked in.¹

A foundational concept for the Every Member in Ministry emphasis is that every one of us is gifted – every one of us is endowed with gifts given by the Spirit. Every member of the church, of the Body of Christ, is a minister. We are in ministry – we are ministers – not just when we are in the church building but wherever we live and work.

Chapter 12 in I Corinthians is a foundational scripture passage for the concepts that birth the Every Member in Ministry understanding of how to organize a church and help its individual members understand their ministerial role in the church and in the world. The images Paul offers in his letter to the churches of Corinth create for us the basis for our being able to understand the relationship between our individual gifts and the ministry of the church as a whole and what we are called to do with our gifts in the world. I'm going to deal with some thoughts relative to the gifts themselves this morning. Next week I'm going to deal with the motivation – the passion – the call – that moves us to use our gifts. And then, on Sunday, February 7, Rev. Rudy Heintzelman, will share with us both in our Sunday morning worship services and in afternoon and evening sessions some additional thoughts as we continue to live into Paul's teaching about what it means to be the church – the Body of Christ – ministers each and every one of us. Rudy's sermon title in the morning is "Pew Potatoes or Curly Fries." I want to encourage you to register for the sessions with Rudy. I consider him

to be one of the really prophetic and outstanding voices on this very sound biblical principle which is the foundation of our ministry model.

Now, let's take a closer look at today's text. It's believed that the situation in the church in the city of Corinth was this: the Christians weren't getting along with one another. Biblical scholars believe there were numerous house churches around the city and not just one central church and these little cell fellowships began to believe they were superior to the others – that some of the gifts they had were the true gifts of the Holy Spirit and that they could go it alone.

What Paul was thus trying to address in his letter to these churches in Corinth and thus churches down through the centuries, including us, was the idea that we need one another. That, yes, there are a variety of gifts, skills, talents, aptitudes, interests, resources, but the purpose of having them is not in order to lord it over one another but to share them with one another. We are in this together. We survive and grow when we share our gifts with one another. And the Holy Spirit is what connects all our gifts. The intention of spiritual gifts is to help us survive and grow as churches and individual Christians.

The danger Paul was trying to thwart is that way of thinking which rears its ugly head every once in awhile that some gift is more important than all the others – and that if you have this gift you have arrived – you are more faithful – you are a more worthy follower than all the rest of us.

The church has at times made the mistake of creating a hierarchy of gifts. There's no question there are some gifts more obvious than others – that there are some gifts we pay more attention to than others – gifts like preaching, teaching, singing - the performance gifts. One writer has labeled them “spotlight gifts,” gifts that draw attention. The fact that they draw our attention does not make them more important than the rest of the gifts though.

Gifts like administration, giving, discernment are referred to as “servant gifts.” It's not very often that people applaud after a meeting has been run well. We sometimes neglect them – downplay them – ignore them. But, Paul's point in this passage is that all gifts are equal in value – all gifts are necessary.²

Let me pause at this point and make a quick observation. There are some who see the lists in the scriptures as all inclusive – that is a closed list – these gifts and no others. They are quick to rattle off the lists as if the gifts mentioned are the only ones. Very quickly, this limited list usually includes such things as: Proclamation or Preaching, Serving, Teaching, Encouragement, Generosity, Mercy, Wisdom, Knowledge, Faith, Healing, Discernment, Speaking in Tongues, Interpreting Tongues, Evangelism, Adminstrating, Shepherding, Prophesying, Hospitality.

I have for a long time had a problem with the concept that some gifts are “spiritual” and then there are skills, talents, aptitudes, strengths, that are, well, not spiritual and therefore not as valuable – not as important – in the life of the church. Over the years I've discovered that there are others who feel the same as me. Resources provided by the Servant Leadership movement and the Stephen Ministry program note that the purpose of the lists should not be seen as an attempt to close the work of the Holy Spirit – as the only gifts that the Holy Spirit uses or provides – but rather, that “the variety of gifts we have been given is really endless.”³

In the last year or two I've been exposed to the work of the Gallup people around strengths. They have developed material to help people identify their strengths. Late last summer several of us attended a workshop at Ginghamburg United Methodist Church and caught a vision of how knowing our strengths can also help us better understand how we are uniquely gifted for ministry and perhaps even the kinds of ministry we are most equipped to do. While I'm promoting coming opportunities, let me encourage you to be watching for the sessions we're going to be offering in the spring utilizing the StrengthsFinder material.

All of us are gifted – all of us are given gifts by the Holy Spirit. All of us – every one of us – you and me – are gifted. Now, I believe one of the most damaging attitudes in the church today is this belief on the part of many that they are not gifted – that what Paul said is not true in their life – that the Holy Spirit really didn't give them

gifts the church could use. One of the reasons this happens is because of what I've already mentioned – this belief that the only gifts the Holy Spirit gives are those “spiritual” ones mentioned in the lists. We need to quit devaluing ourselves. When you chose to follow Christ – received the blessing of the Holy Spirit – within you were placed or activated or unleashed skills and abilities that are absolutely necessary for the work of the church.

So, how does one know what their gifts are? There are several tools available – little inventories one can take based on studies that have been done. StrengthsFinder is one of those. We've also used here the Stephen Ministry Spiritual Gift Inventory material. Let me share with you what I had confirmed about myself when I took those two inventories. My top five gifts according to the Stephen Ministry Gifts Inventory were: Servanthood, Generosity, Mercy, Nurturing Leadership, and Encouragement or Helping. The five strengths the StrengthsFinder Inventory noted were: Empathy, Responsibility, Developer, Adaptability, and Arranger. The sessions we will hold in the spring will involve examining our strengths and considering what sorts of ministries seem to fit persons with such strengths. If you take the course, you can find out what those things I just mentioned say about who I am.

Now, there are other ways to consider what your gifts are. I think the most important questions you can ask yourself are questions like: “What stimulates you – what fulfills you?” “What do you love to do?” “What type of things express the real you?” “What do you think you are really good at doing or being?” “What makes you feel satisfied or proud?” “What comes out of the center of your being?”⁴

The Body of Christ is a gifted community – not to be self-reliant – but to be Christ in the world – to continue Christ's work in the world. It is what we are together that makes us the body though – not what we do alone. It's when we utilize our gifts together – in community – as a community – that we are able to go where Christ's feet need to go. It is our gifts together that allow us to go to the lost and poor and hurting. It is our gifts together that enable us to teach as Christ's mouth taught – about love for God and love of others. It is our gifts together that enable us to see as Jesus' eyes saw – finding beauty and redemption and grace in a prostitute, a leper, a tax collector. It is our gifts together that enable us to touch as Jesus touched – with gentleness and love and healing. The only way we are ever going to accomplish preaching, teaching, healing, restoring, tearing down, building up and redeeming the world we live in is by relying on God's Spirit and one another's talents, gifts, skills, strengths, interests, aptitudes. We are together the Body of Christ.⁵

Let us pray.

1. Homiletics, p. 23, January, 2007).
2. King Duncan, “Smart as a Goat,” Collected Sermons, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
3. Jacqueline McMakin & Rhoda Nary, Discovering Your Gifts, Vision, and Call (San Francisco: Harper,), p. 17.
4. Ibid., p. 18.
5. King Duncan, “I Can Make It Myself,” Collected Sermons, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-00000-20.