

# Exercise Your Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:1-11  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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January 17, 2016

Last week, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we explored the meaning of our baptism and how it serves *both* as a sign that we are a valued and beloved member of the family of God, and that we are called for service to further the ways of God in our midst and in the world. Through our baptism, the call to continue the ministries begun by Jesus extends to each and every one of us, not just to those ordained and installed into positions of church leadership.

Today's Epistle Reading from apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian congregation serves to further this understanding. Paul does this through a discussion of what he calls 'spiritual gifts,' or 'manifestations of the Spirit'. If I were to ask each of you to reflect upon and list your spiritual gifts, which include your talents, abilities, and interests, what would that list contain? While some might wonder, "I'm not quite sure," Paul wants us to realize that ultimately no one's list would be empty – because each of us has been gifted by God.

Perhaps Paul's most important point is *why* each one of us is blessed with a variety of spiritual gifts and talents. Verse 7 plainly states, "**To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**" I'll return to this in a moment. He then goes on to present an unexhausted **list of spiritual gifts**, including: wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, discernment, and various kinds of tongues or the ability to interpret those tongues. Elsewhere in different letters, Paul mentions other gifts of the Spirit, including: serving, teaching, encouragement, giving, generosity, hospitality, leadership, mercy, administration, and various church roles like apostle, evangelist, and preacher. I personally think Paul missed listing a few important gifts, like the very necessary ability of knowing how to fix a church building, including carpentry, masonry, plumbing, and the yet-to-be discovered gift in Paul's day of electrical work and computer knowledge.

**What do you suppose was the underlying issue to which Paul was addressing? In a nutshell, it was about finding unity within the congregation.** There was an enormous amount of diversity in that ancient congregation, and it was often expressed through dissention, division, and power struggles. Organized religion experiences much of the same problems today.

**When Paul emphasizes that each one of us is gifted in a different manner, he intends to counteract self-centeredness and the human tendency to compare ourselves to others in a competitive and judgmental way.** For when that happens, we either put on airs of arrogance and superiority over others, or the opposite, a sense of inferiority and worthlessness. Therefore, **we are not meant to see differing gifts in a hierarchical fashion, but simply as different gifts for different purposes.** Preaching, for instance, is not a greater spiritual gift than the ability to manage finances, or prepare a meal for someone in need, or sing in the choir, or teach our children, or greeting a

visitor, or know how to get the heater fixed when it breaks, or any other of the countless necessities of effectively being the church.

It cannot be overemphasized how we are to think of our giftedness by God – not for our individual glory, but for the common good! And if the common good is the goal of using our gifts and talents, then the obvious correlation is that **if we aren't sharing our gifts and abilities with the community of faith and in our daily lives, then our 'common good' isn't as good as it could be.** Ministry, then, is everybody's responsibility, not just the paid church staff, or the ruling elders on the session.

Notice how Paul connects spirituality and spiritual gifts with very *concrete* things, things that are necessary to be the church. Again, this keeps us from developing some sort of hierarchy based on who's "got the Spirit" and who doesn't. Spoiler alert, we all do. We come to realize, as biblical commentator Raewynne Whiteley puts it, "**Gifts are not merit badges for holiness or a sign of approval from God, but God's response to the needs of our communities.**"

How, therefore, can the full range of gifts exhibited by the total membership of this congregation be recognized, encouraged, supported and welcomed into the service of Christ in and through our ministry to each other, in our neighborhoods, and in the world? Please take the following to heart:

- If your gift is wisdom, we need it.
- If it is knowledge, we need it.
- If it is teaching, we need it.
- If it is administration, we need it.
- If it is with music, we need it.
- If it is in prayer, we need it.
- If it is in service, we need it.
- If it is in compassion, we need it.
- If it is in hospitality, we need it.
- If it is in [you fill in the blank] we need it to build up the community of faith in this time and place.

I've come to adopt the following philosophy: Our gifts, talents and abilities aren't accidental, our passion and energy for specific tasks isn't accidental. Remember, all of our gifts, services and activities are activated by God for a purpose to be used for the common good. For as Karen Stokes summarizes, "Paul's words offer a refreshing, even shocking reminder that **faith, while personal, is never private, and that the gift each person has been given is meant to be shared.**" Let us share generously with one another!

One of the things we can share with the larger Tulsa community as College Hill Presbyterian Church is fulfilling the third point in our Mission Statement: **Reach out with a compassionate voice for peace and justice. And in recognition of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, we would be remiss if we didn't speak out against the racial injustice that continues to plague this country, and indeed the world.**

Just this past week, Phillips Theological Seminary held their annual Remind and Renew ministers conference. This year's theme was "**Let's Talk About Race, Liberty & Justice For All.**" In a keynote address, the Rev. Sharon Watkins, the general minister and president of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denomination, reminds us that the body of Christ, the church, cannot be what it should be "as long as the gash of racism

still exists." Speaking theologically, she prophetically reminds us **that racism is sin**. She rightfully, in my opinion, called it "**America's original sin** ... thinking that it is OK to displace Native Americans, OK to build nations with slavery. We want to root this out, but it runs deep." But as we all know, as she stated it, "Principalities and powers do not go down without a fight."

There was an important article this week posted on the patheos.com website. The article, entitled "Shall We Overcome? An Invitation for MLK, Jr. Day," was written by the Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes, Jr., the former pastor of the historic Riverside Church in New York, and the Rev. Dr. Katharine Henderson, who is the president of Auburn (Presbyterian) Seminary. Reflecting on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s prophetic and immortal "I Have a Dream" speech, they ask: "**Are we any closer to the dream that King spoke of or is it now even further from our reach?**" They observe, "As far as the eye can see, we are witnesses to an age of alienation, disaffection, polarization, demonization, terrorism, fascism, and wholesale demoralization. For countless thousands of our fellow citizens, the dream has become a nightmare. Lest these words make us glaze over, **let us remember that these evils affect human beings, each beloved of God, whatever their circumstance of birth.**"

Then, after a litany of current acts of oppression and injustice that still affect "the other" in this country, they write: "King gave voice to the essential American democratic ideals that may still draw us together as one people, articulated in the Constitution of our nation for **life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — for all.**"

So how do you and I, how do we together, move beyond a simple remembrance of King's vision for equality to an actual change of heart and mind and culture? At times I wonder how open to change are we really are, as individuals and especially as institutions? Nevertheless, **it's crucial to reflect upon what you can do, what we can do together, to take another step forward in crossing the barriers of race, religion and class.** Sometimes I think it's the class issue that is the biggest hurdle for mainline Presbyterians. **Let that be a priority for us throughout this year.**

I will conclude this sermon on exercising our individual and congregational spiritual gifts and talents for the common good by quoting the conclusion of that article:

**King believed that with God's help, we could do this freedom thing. Let's not merely commemorate his dream this holiday. Let's prove him right. Let's embody the dream in living color. Let's show where our hearts are headed even if we have not gotten there yet.**

Amen.

Resources:  
*Feasting on the Word Commentary*