

Spiritual Gifts for the Common Good

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

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You don't have to raise your hand, but I'm wondering how many of us made a New Year's Resolution to exercise more. If you did, I encourage you to follow through and keep exercising. Oh, by the way, since I'm a pastor not a gym trainer, I'm not specifically referring to physical exercise, though that's always a good idea, but rather spiritual exercise. **I'd like for us to reflect this day on the notion of spiritual gifts: What are they? How do we get them? How do we put them into practice?**

Let me tell you right from the start, you'll get a different answer from a conservative evangelical pastor than you will a progressive one. So, let's start with the basics. Let's start with the Bible – a very Presbyterian thing to do, regardless of where one finds oneself on the theological spectrum. Liturgically, this is a timely reflection. For just last week, on Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we explored how the meaning of our baptism 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, therefore, 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 the 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'. You may remember that the word 'manifestation' is the English translation of the Greek word *epiphany*. So, this is a great fit for this liturgical season of Epiphany.

If I were to ask each of you to reflect upon and list your spiritual gifts, 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 crucial point in a moment.

Paul goes on to present a **list of spiritual gifts**, including: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, discernment, and various kinds of tongues or the ability to interpret those tongues. There are other lists that occur elsewhere in different letters. Paul mentions other gifts of the Spirit, including some very concrete things, such as: serving, teaching, encouragement, giving, generosity, hospitality, leadership, mercy, administration. Another one of his lists includes various church leadership roles like apostle, evangelist, and preacher. In my opinion, however, Paul missed listing a few very important gifts, like the ability to fix things, and technological skills 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, and becoming all that community of faith could become. Biblical scholars surmise there was an enormous

amount of diversity in that ancient congregation, and it was often expressed through factions, dissention, division, cliques, and power struggles. These are not uncommon in organized religion today.

When Paul emphasizes that each one of us in a community of faith 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 even judgmental way. For when that happens, it's not a big step away from arrogance, including spiritual arrogance, and sense of superiority over others. Or, the opposite happens, a growing sense of being inferior and having nothing worth sharing.

We are not meant to see differing gifts, therefore, in a hierarchical fashion, but simply as **different gifts for different purposes and functions within the congregation.** 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 greet visitors, 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! **If the common good is the goal of using our gifts and talents, then an obvious correlation is that if we are not 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, we must constantly remind ourselves, is everybody's responsibility, not just the paid church staff, or the ruling elders on the session.

Again, notice how Paul connects spirituality and spiritual gifts with very *concrete* things, things that are necessary to function as a relevant community of faith. For 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 together – 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 or the arts, we need it.
- If it is in prayer, we need it.
- If it is in public speaking, we need it.
- If it is in compassion, we need it.
- If it is in hospitality, we need it.
- If it is in generosity, we need it.
- If it is in technology, we need it.
- If it is in the use of tools or working with your hands, we need it.
- If it is in [you fill in the blank with your gifts and your passions], we need it to build up our community of faith in this time and place.

This passage of scripture teaches us that 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 in and through the Holy Spirit dwelling within each one of us 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 working to fulfill 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 this weekend, we would be remiss if we didn't speak out against the racial injustices that continue to plague this city, this country, and indeed the world. After the Terence Crutcher killing in 2016, of an unarmed black man shot by a white police officer, an intentional group of white progressive pastors have been meeting monthly ever since. An initial purpose of our gathering was to help us all figure out how best to address issues of race within the specific congregation we serve. Soon, however, we discovered the real place to start meant looking at ourselves in the mirror and dealing with the elements of racism and white privilege within ourselves.

We have read and discussed several books. The one we just finished last week is *Anxious To Talk About It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Racism*, by Carolyn B. Helsel. She is a preaching professor at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. She is white. I have recently purchased her companion book, that I have yet to read, "*Preaching About Racism: A Guide for Faith Leaders.*" Martin Luther King, Jr. was a remarkably gifted leader, who among others, influenced to this day what it means to grow and live into a beloved community. May we all reflect upon that tomorrow and beyond.

May we also be intentional about discovering and sharing our own Spirit-given gifts. For College Hill, as a community of faith, is blessed and gifted in so many ways. Just look around you. Yet, as part of the body of Christ, it takes all of us, sharing our particular gifts together, to live into the fullness that this community of faith can be and become.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Amen.

Resources:
Feasting on the Word Commentary