

Using Our Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:1-31
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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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's start with the basics. Let's start with the Bible, which is a very Presbyterian thing to do, regardless of where one finds oneself on the theological spectrum. Liturgically, this is a timely reflection. Two Sundays ago was 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 lives and in the world. To put it more succinctly, **our baptism serves to give us our identity and our mission, just as it did for Jesus**. 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. Yet, we will certainly apply this later in this service of worship to the installation of the four incoming Ruling Elders to serve on our Session.

Today's First Epistle Reading from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian community of faith serves to further this understanding of identity and mission. 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 for **epiphany**. So, this is a great fit for this liturgical season of Epiphany.

In our Second Epistle Reading we learn how Paul uses the illustration of the differing parts of the human body, that together represent the whole, as a way to explain what he means by differing spiritual gifts for different people. **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. Chapter 12, verse 7 plainly states, "**To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.**" Each of us is blessed with spiritual gifts, and we are called to use them so that *together* we might be all we can be as a community of faith. Paul goes on to present a list of spiritual gifts, including wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, being prophetic, discernment, and various kinds of tongues or the ability to interpret those tongues. Interestingly, there are other lists that occur elsewhere in different letters from Paul. He mentions in Romans 12, for example, other gifts of the Spirit, including some very concrete things, such as: serving, teaching, encouragement, giving, generosity, hospitality, leadership, diligence, mercy, administration. Almost sounds like a list of ministry teams or small groups. Another one of his lists includes various church leadership roles like apostle, evangelist, and preacher. In my opinion, however, Paul missed listing some very important gifts, like the ability to fix things, and technological skills and computer knowledge. And what about the gift of those able to provide live streaming? (Thank you, Trevor, for sharing your gifts with us!)

Now, 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 dissention, division, factions, cliques, and power struggles. These, of course, are not uncommon in organized religion today. In fact, they are some of the reasons for people leaving churches. When Paul emphasizes that each one of us in a community of faith is gifted in a different manner, like different parts of the body, he intends to **counteract self-centeredness and the human tendency to compare ourselves to others in a competitive, envious, and even judgmental way**. For when that happens, it's not a big step away from prideful arrogance, including spiritual arrogance, and sense of superiority and entitlement over others. Or, the opposite happens, which perhaps worse, a growing sense of being inferior and having nothing worth sharing.

We are not meant to see our differing gifts, therefore, in a hierarchical fashion. Rather, simply as different gifts for different purposes and functions within the community of faith. Preaching, for instance, is not a greater spiritual gift than the ability to manage finances, or prepare a meal, or sing in the choir, or teach our children or adults, or greet visitors, or be willing to climb a ladder to change a lightbulb, 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 God's glory!** And yes, that's harder to do in our Western Culture that idolizes individualism compared to those that truly value and understand the commonality and connectedness needed to live together in authentic community.

Since working for 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 everyone's responsibility. It's my responsibility, it's your responsibility. That's part of **the cost of discipleship.** That's why we include in our bulletin of worship every Sunday, "Ministers: All the members of the congregation!"

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, then, can the full range of gifts exhibited by the total membership of this congregation be recognized, encouraged, valued, supported, and welcomed into the service of Christ in and through our ministry together – to each other, in our families, our neighborhoods, and in the world?

I encourage you to reflect upon your gifts and that which you are passionate about, and find a ministry team for which you can volunteer, or small group that you can join. 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.**"

Indeed, "*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*" Spiritual Gifts: we all have them, let's use them – to the glory of God.

Amen.