

Spirit-Given Gifts

1 Corinthians 12: 1 – 11

January 18, 2004

Last Sunday we celebrated the baptism of Jesus.
We also dipped our hands in the font and remembered that we, too, are baptised.
Baptism reminds us of our identity as Christians.

It reminds each of us, of you that

You are created by God.

You are a child of God.

You are beloved of God.

You are accepted by God.

Ultimately, these statements are true –

True about God's love and intentions for each of you

And true about who you are at your deepest reality.

Today we will dwell with another reality of our life as people
who form the church, the Body of Christ.

This statement is also true about you:

You have a gift given by the Holy Spirit

which is intended to help build up the Body of Christ.

You have a talent, a treasure, a way of seeing and serving

That is a gift God has given to you,

A gift that the church needs so that it can be whole,

healthy and equipped to make a difference in God's world.

It is a gift that Paul describes as being "for the common good."

There are many spiritual gifts that are spoken of in the Bible.

When Paul writes a letter to the young church in Corinth,

he refers to several spiritual gifts:

wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing,

the working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits,

speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues.

If we include gifts that are referred to in other parts of Scripture

we could also name many others:

creativity, prayer, giving, leadership, organization, service,

mercy, justice, assisting, teaching, crafting, hospitality,

mission, evangelism

A great variety of gifts, each one given by the Spirit.

A great variety of ways to serve, each one given by the Spirit.

Now some may say that only certain people are gifted.

In our achievement-oriented society,

we envy people who seem so gifted, so talented, so bright.

We may wish we had some of their talent –

or the fame and money that often goes with those who are athletically talented. But Paul is speaking, not to an especially talented group, but to very ordinary people - people who have heard the good news about Jesus and have gathered to help each other follow the way that Jesus showed. Paul is telling them that each of them has a gift to contribute to the common good. Each and every person is valued and blessed by God with a gift that can help build up the church in Corinth.

Unfortunately for Paul and the young church he had started many of the attitudes of the culture around persisted within the church and this was causing troubles. Some felt that their gifts were superior to others. The gift of wisdom was much valued in Greco-Roman culture. And in this community of faith, it seemed the gift of speaking in tongues was considered very significant. Speaking in tongues was a kind of ecstatic prayer which was understood by very few. The person speaking in tongues usually didn't know what was said. There are Christian communities today where the gift of tongues plays a role. Often it is a role in private prayer – a way to give voice to powerful feelings and thoughts intended for God's ear. Paul was concerned that those with certain gifts were lording it over others while failing to recognize the value of all the gifts and the people who had those gifts. Each gift was given by the same Spirit, Paul reminds them. Each person has something to offer the community of faith. Together, the gifts are meant for the good of the whole.

Last fall, the Board of the Carlisle church agreed to be guinea pigs As I tried out a Spirit-Given Gifts Inventory Developed by a colleague in B.C. There were several pages of statements. When people finished the inventory, we went through and added up – Ending up with three or more “gifts” that each person felt Applied to them. For each gift identified, there was a page describing how That gift was needed in the community, Figures in the Bible who had displayed this same gift And passages of Scripture that referred to the gift. The gifts fell into four general areas:

Later board members had a chance to talk with those

who had similar gifts.

I encouraged everyone to read, reflect and pray about how they could develop and offer those gifts in the community if they weren't already doing so.

At the same time I began to think about how different areas of ministry that the congregations do could make best use of the variety of gifts.

You might wonder why we would bother with this concept.

It is, in many ways, labour-intensive as we begin to discern Spirit-given gifts and where those gifts could best contribute to the common good.

But think about the alternative!

Think about arm-twisting people into volunteering for tasks or roles that we traditionally have had.

Teaching Sunday School comes to mind.

Or being the church treasurer.

Or chairing the board.

Of course we don't just want any warm body to fill the role.

We do think it's important that the treasurer can add and subtract and manage a bank book.

We like to have people teach Sunday School who at least like children.

And it's helpful if a chairperson can put together an agenda.

But what a difference it makes if the role and the person fit together like hand and glove!

What a difference if the person who takes on a task does so with a sense of delight and joy,

knowing they are making a real and valuable contribution.

I think it could mean that the ministry of the congregation is spread over the whole people of God

with everyone contributing that which they do best,

that which God gives them energy and passion and skill to do.

It might mean that some things don't get done –

or at least not in the same way.

Hopefully it would mean that one person does not

get burdened with many, many tasks,

few of which they actually enjoy.

Looking at the church's ministry this way

might influence our overall mission

as we take into account the actual gifts

present in our congregation.

For example, one of the gifts that appeared a lot

among the members of the Carlisle board

was the gift of hospitality.

Now, there are many more people in the congregation

and the emphasis could certainly turn out to be somewhere else

when more people take part in the inventory.

But that result made me curious about what a

church with strong gifts for hospitality would do.
Offering Alpha courses would be one ministry, I bet.
Or we might find that the congregation
is very justice-oriented and then we would want to look seriously
at the justice issues of our time
and where we could develop this passion
to make a difference in the world.
There are so many possibilities for making a difference
through the gifts that God gives each of us.
It's exciting to know that God works in this way.

This week I read a new book by Marcus Borg
called *The Heart of Christianity*.
In it he talked of salvation as being both social and personal.
Not only are we called to a path of personal transformation
but salvation is equally a social experience.
"Salvation is about life together."
Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God.
Paul created new communities "in Christ" – like the church in Corinth –
communities which showed, in their life together,
a different way of being, a new model.
That is why it was so important to Paul that every person
was recognized as having an important gift.
That is why those gifts needed to be used,
not to make stars of a few,
but to build up the common good,
used for the well-being of the congregation
and, beyond that, for the mission of God in the world.

"Salvation comes from God, even as it involves our response," says Borg.
It is God who freed Hebrew slaves in Egypt,
God who is the source of light and healing and gifts.
"Yet salvation always involves our response.
If the slaves in Egypt had not responded to the message that God was liberating them,
they would still be there.
If the exiles in Babylon had not set foot on their journey of return,
they would still be there.
Without our response, little or nothing will change in our lives
or in the life of the world. Salvation is the work of God,
and yet we must respond."
God gives each of us a gift, needed for the wholeness of our congregation
and the healing of the world.
God will help each of us as we discern our gift, as we develop it,
as we put it to use.
But we need to offer that gift to the community
and to God.
As we do so, God will change both us and the world.

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