

“INSPIRED GIFTS”

I Corinthians 12:1-11; Genesis 2:4b-7
October 9, 2016 – Rev. Jerry Duggins

Among the churches of the first century, Corinth was considered to be the most gifted. They had people who spoke in tongues, people who prophesied. They had great healers, teachers, and counselors. They had people who performed miraculous deeds and people of great faith. And yet, they were among the most conflicted congregations. Their gifts had become opportunities for jealousy and boastfulness. The gifts intended to pull them together and make them a strong congregation, seemed to divide them. So Paul feels compelled to have a word about spiritual gifts.

Now, we have a very gifted congregation. We have talented musicians, knowledgeable teachers, and wise counselors. We have people with extraordinary compassion, people gifted for hospitality and the ministry of encouragement. You can find, here, generosity, nurture, and mercy. There are some gifted for service, administration and prayer; people gifted with words and deeds. We are not, to my knowledge, currently conflicted; but we have known a disagreement or two.

We would not be unwise to heed what Paul said to the church in Corinth. It's no accident that he begins with a reference to idolatry. We've been talking about this in our study of Romans on Wednesday morning. I like what Paul says in chapter one about idolaters. "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie." This is precisely what we do when we spend our lives in pursuit of money, prestige, or power... or when we make the gift more important than the giver. When we make it all about the gift, then what was meant for a blessing becomes a curse.

These are gifts from the Spirit who constantly bears witness to the truth that Jesus is our master and we are blessed to be his followers. The gift directs us to the giver. We are easily mesmerized by the gift, heaping praise on the gifted. We can become jealous of what another has or arrogant about our own giftedness. But this doesn't happen when we see the gift as a blessing and the giver as the one to whom honor is due. And it is the same spirit who distributes a variety of gifts, the same Lord to whom our service is due, and the same God who is active and present in our lives.

I love the poetry of the creation story in chapter one of Genesis, but the imagery of this little section in the second story which we read is powerful. It emphasizes our connection to the earth, formed from the humus of the ground. From the humus, we are reminded of our humble origins. But then the Spirit breathes into us the breath of life and we become a living being. Spirit, *ruach* in the original Hebrew, literally means "wind" or "breath." "Inspired" literally means to "breathe into."

To be alive is to be "inspired." To have life is to have the breath of life is to have the "Spirit." And to have the Spirit is to be gifted. Spiritual gifts come from the Spirit and

when properly acknowledged, they draw our attention to God whom James tells us is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

“Concerning spiritual gifts,” remember the giver. Before anything else, remember the giver.

“Now there are varieties of gifts....” Some are very impressive while others go almost unnoticed. There’s an annual preaching conference called the festival of homiletics. I haven’t been in several years, but I still recall the creativity of Thomas Troeger, the story-telling of Barbara Brown Taylor, and the almost musical and rhythmic quality of James Forbes.

A recent Pew Survey found that many people looking for a new church were looking for a good sermon. There’s little doubt that the high visibility gifts attract the most attention at first, but I don’t think that’s what keeps a person coming week after week. It takes people who are able to make the guest feel welcome, a community engaged in worship, people who are good listeners and committed to addressing the needs within and beyond the walls of the church.

Once in a while I try to emulate what I’ve seen in some of these great preachers and I like to think that they have made me a better preacher. But even on those days when the sermon is exceptional, it’s not what makes this a great community of believers. It’s never the one gift. It’s the variety of gifts that creates a healthy church.

This means that your gift matters. It was a great joy to preach to our brothers and sisters in Cuba, but it was the variety of gifts brought by each member of our group and the gifts we found already present in the people of Perico that made the bond of Christian fellowship what it was. “To each,” Paul writes, “is given the manifestation of the Spirit.”

Now you may have listened to Paul’s list and said to yourself that none of these describe you. In fact some of these embarrass us Presbyterians. Speaking in tongues, prophesying and working miracles are not so well received in our churches. But we have people who are gifted in languages, who offer great insight into understanding the world in which live, and who perform wonders. And of course this list is not exhaustive. The spiritual gift inventory which you can find on the website listed in the bulletin lists 30 gifts for which there is a biblical basis. Assisting, welcoming, encouraging, showing mercy, artistry and crafts are just a few. If you’ve never thought about your spiritual gifts, this is a good inventory to get you started.

Exploring our gifts individually can help us be more intentional about practicing them. Using your gift in the church makes us a stronger community. There isn’t really enough time to go over the great variety of gifts, but here are a few general remarks for helping us think about them.

Any gift can be spiritual. In *Babbette's Feast*, a woman inherits a large sum of money which she spends on food for two sisters and their church community. She prepares and serves a feast over the course of which old wounds are healed. Babbette was a gifted chef, but she used this talent not for herself, but to heal scars. She used cooking to build community.

In a similar way, I remember a time when Bob invited his coworkers and volunteers at an urban food pantry to a picnic at his cottage. Bob was a great cook. It never occurred to him to just serve hamburgers and hot dogs. Along with the fancy entrée and sides, he served poached pears and a homemade cake. He used his gift to bless others in a way they hadn't expected. There was something spiritual about this gift.

For a gift to be spiritual doesn't mean it has to be impractical. Even though spiritual gifts are not themselves material, they touch on the realities of life. Generosity doesn't have to be about money, but it often makes use of money by those who exercise the gift.

Two things make a gift spiritual. After affirming that each person has been gifted, Paul tells the church that these individual gifts are "for the common good." Spiritual gifts are for us, but in the end that are not about us individually. They are about the community of faith. They, when properly exercised, bind us to one another and build us up into the community of faith.

Any ability when used to bring us together takes on a spiritual character. Tutoring, disaster assistance, mentoring, advocacy and education are by their very nature "spiritual" activities. These and many other things seek to build up others, to make their lives richer and fuller. In a way, they mimic the activity of the Spirit who breathes into the human being the breath of life.

This is true not only when we exercise our gifts on behalf of another person, but also when we plant a tree, practice sustainable agriculture or limit our carbon footprint. We form a community not just with each other, but also with the earth itself. Whatever gifts we use to build community, we implicitly acknowledge the spiritual nature of all life.

Of course this is not enough for those who belong to the community of faith. Spiritual gifts not only connect us to one another and to the earth, but they also direct our attention to the giver, to God. You may recall the movie, *Chariots of Fire*, in which Eric Liddell talks about his gift for running. His fiancée worries that his running may lead him to forget his faith. He tells her: "God gave me a gift... made me fast and when I run I feel God's pleasure."

God is pleased when you use our gifts. It seems obvious. When we give gifts, we like nothing more than to see them put to use. That's really the best acknowledgement of gratitude for a gift: to use it. In the church, we try to use our gifts for the common good; but I don't think God would take it amiss if we paused to offer thanks as well.

My mom was pretty laid back in the child rearing department, but there was one thing she always nagged us about: writing the thank you notes to grandma for the Christmas gifts. I'm afraid her sons were a big disappointment in this, but she was right; and it's no less true in the gifts that God gives. Acknowledging the giver is part of what makes them spiritual. When we are able to offer wise counsel, we ought to give thanks to God. When our culinary skills bring others together and build solid relationships, give thanks to God. When medical skills produce healing, give thanks to God. When music lifts us up and refreshes us for the week ahead, give thanks to God. When the spirit of generosity results in a fully funded carpet fund, give thanks to God. When acts of compassion bring a meal during a trying time, give thanks to God. Anytime the gifts of God build up the people of God, give thanks to God. Amen.