

## **“What Is the Gift You Offer?”**

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**Sunday, January 17, 2016  
Second Sunday after Epiphany**

**Readings from Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 12:12 and selected verses**

*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.*

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.*

*1 Corinthians 12:1-11*

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” God has so arranged the body, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

*1 Corinthians 12: 12 and selected verses*

If you had told me in high school or even college that someday I would be preaching regularly, I would have told you you were out of your ever loving mind. In those days speaking before groups of more than five or six people made me lightheaded and shaky. When I saw the lectionary passage for this morning, it took me back to an earlier time, for this was the chapter used in my very first sermon. It should come as no surprise given my anxieties that my 15 minute written sermon was delivered in about nine minutes flat. In fact, when I first began to sense a call to ministry while in Edinburgh, Scotland, I told my fiancée--now husband Scott--that I would not be in a parish ministry but in a counseling center so that preaching would not figure into my work. So here I am a living example of the saying “If you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.”

Even though it brings back anxiety-producing memories, I still love the wisdom of this chapter. Though Paul sometimes writes deep theological treatises, in other places he writes in poetic ways; consider 1 Corinthians 13 passage about love that begins with “love is patient and kind.” This morning’s chapter offers us imagery of why the body of Christ is such a beautiful and apt description of what it means to be a follower of Christ stating that each of them is a gift and when we use these gifts in love, we create a healthy and alive body of Christ.

Paul had helped to start the church at Corinth so it is not surprising he would stay in touch with them. However, it appears that the Corinthian Christians were going through a time of challenge. As one scholar summarized it, “*Paul wrote...in response to reports of sharp dissension among the believers. The nature of the conflicts*” is not fully known, but one can easily sniff out possible reasons... “*rival loyalties to different evangelists including Paul; the eating of food consecrated to idols*” which deeply concerned the Jews; “*practices involving the sacraments, speaking in tongues; and the doctrine of the resurrection. No single hypothesis explains*” all the problems. The other thing to note is that Corinth was “*one of the most important cities of Greece...and the young congregation was ...likely made up of persons from a variety of cultures--Jews and Greeks, slaves, free, and few of noble birth, the powerful as well as the weak, the wise as well as the simple.*” It is easy to understand why there might be conflicts and tensions with so many traditions and nationalities present in the newly formed church.

Paul offers powerful words of advice, challenge, and encouragement. First, he speaks to them on an individual level. Each person, he points out, has particular gifts to share with the church and that they should be willing to step up and share them. On a community level he reminds them that while there are many different cultures and traditions within the church, that they are to remember they are part of something larger, the body of Christ. In fact not only does he acknowledge those differences, he celebrates them. Just as he makes central in other of his writings, he wants them to seek *unity not uniformity*. He does not encourage them to become just like one another, rather he encourages them to recognize and honor one another’s differences for it makes for a richer, more diverse, more gifted body. Knowing that such differences can be challenging, he uses powerful images of the parts of the body being all necessary that one might hear and see, walk and witness and that each part is essential to a healthy body. Remember the image of people in various nations gathering together on the day we call Pentecost or the birthday of the church. The Spirit that blew in and around the people enabling them to understand one another and to find their connection with one another in the body of Christ. Paul says it is by the power of the Spirit, the love we share in Christ, that which helps to make us one. With loving concern he speaks about the gifts that we each bring that helps to build up the body. His words are offered in the hope that the Corinthians would learn to work and serve together for the greater good that would help them to flourish.

It struck me then, too, that while Paul’s words are apt for addressing the people of Corinth, his words are living words that have the power to speak to us today. Even though he wrote them to people of faith in Corinth in a time of turmoil, the call to share our gifts can also be offered in times of celebration. I was reminded of that when I was at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church last Sunday for the installation of Ed Zumwinkle as their new pastor. The Webster church has been an important part of my family’s life. It is the home church of my husband’s family. Their session took me under care and endorsed me to be ordained and our son was baptized there.

This passage of Paul was woven into that service as well both as a reading and as part of the installation liturgy reminding us of the various roles of the pastor as preacher, exhorter and as teacher and leader. In her sermon, Kim Skilling reminded the congregation that it is more than the pastor who is to serve--it takes the whole congregation. She encouraged them to recognize that even though their pastor has many gifts, his were not the only gifts required. She challenged and inspired them to share their gifts and serve as one Body.

She also acknowledged that it isn't always easy to take on new challenges, that sometimes we are unsettled by our callings, uncomfortable and not sure about trying something new. Indeed sometimes they take us by surprise. When she said that, I remembered my own struggle about sensing God calling me to serve in the parish. I had tried to ignore it but God is a persistent God. One afternoon years before in the former associate pastor's office just 150 feet from where I was sitting in the installation service, I had finally accepted it. It was when I was finally able to face my fears, I felt a sense of peace when I was able to trust that God would guide me.

Paul called those at Corinth and he calls us to be open to the Spirit who both offers comfort and peace, as well as challenge and change. His words remind us that each one of us is important to the life of this congregation. So while our staff has much to offer, we need one another. Bill can play the organ--can he play the organ!--but he cannot be all the voices in the Chancel Choir, nor could he ring all the bells in the bell choir. The band cannot get by with only one instrument or one voice for each song--it takes both the band and the sound booth folks to make it happen. Rob cannot be the only worker on a mission work trip, or take 35 students on work camp by himself, nor can David and I make all the visits needed for a large congregation, so we have Stephen Ministers and Deacons who call on people in hospitals and those who bring communion to people at home. All of us whether singing in the choir or going on work camp trips or being willing to pray for others, or bring food for Meal a Month help to make this body of Christ strong.

Today we are hearing from some who serve in various ways. I invite you to listen for the Spirit as you consider sharing these gifts listed in the ministries sheet. If you take the challenge there will be those along with the Spirit who will help you learn what it is you need to know to carry out such ministries and do them well. This is the beginning of a new year. The story of the wise ones is still fresh in our minds--they came to worship the child and brought gifts to the one who is Emmanuel God with us. What gift might God be calling you to bring before the king? Amen.

Quote is from article "Showing the Body: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 12-13 for Epiphany" by Dennis Ormseth at Lutheran Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, as part of "Texts in Context" from Word and World 6/1 1986.