

It was quite a congregation Paul wrote to in this first Letter to the Corinthians. In our day it would be called the First Pentecostal Methodist Baptist Lutheran Presbyterian Christian Church and it would be located in Las Vegas, Nevada. Las Vegas, I suggest, not just because of so much prostitution, because in its heyday, Corinth was also ritzy, snazzy, lascivious, addicting, rich in jobs, poor in morality. The church in Corinth had folks practicing what we'd call incest and some within the church thought that it was perfectly fine. Maybe we can understand that because of the wild, wild nature of this most important trading port in ancient Greece, that brought all sorts of people from all over the Mediterranean together, each with their own appetites of every sort, many providing an opportunity for the locals to make a quick buck. The Corinthian Christians were very tempted to learn to just roll easy with the sailors.

“Methodist Baptist Lutheran Presbyterian Christian,” I say because the church in Corinth seems to have had an exceedingly wide range of beliefs. Many ideas clanging hard against others. So maybe it isn't so strange that with all kinds of religion floating in the Corinthian air that in the little band of Christians, some saw themselves as spiritual athletes extraordinaire.

“I speak in tongues – glossolalia, you know.”

“So what, I prophecy!” retorts another.

They were puffed up, full of themselves. The spiritual powers competition, and a tendency to look down on the others around them, were a potent mixture that was spiritually killing the eclectic little church.

But they were the church, Paul insisted. They were the ones had been grasped by at least some understanding of Christ's spirit. Now it was Paul's job in this letter to do what he could get them onto a more faithful Christian path. Here in 1 Cor. 12-14 especially, he focuses on what it means to be empowered by God, really, in the right way. How Christians should see one another and serve other. Immediately after this morning's passage, we hear the familiar:

12 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.

13 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.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

15 If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body.

Hey, Corinthians, wake up! Your Christian journey isn't a solo sport. It isn't a matter of what "the most spiritual" among you can demonstrate in healing, or prophecy, or wisdom. This is a team endeavor. You don't make it to your goal except as team.

23 and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect;

24 whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member,

25 that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

Everyone is important. Every member of the body is important.

Together we make one mosaic. It is important to know your place, your individual place, but not for your own glorification or self-interest, but to know what you can do in the service of the greater Body of Jesus Christ.

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In that very vein, in the last 30 years there has been a lot of talk about this morning's passage, it being 1 of 4 places in the New Testament that talks about spiritual gifts, what they are and how they are to be used. In every church supplies catalog, many denominational websites, a featured element is some form of a "Spiritual Gifts Inventory," a little questionnaire that you fill out to determine what your spiritual gifts are. They purport to tell you whether your gifts are in teaching, healing, administration, shepherding or one of the many others. If you haven't taken such a test you might find it interesting, and in the notes attached to this sermon text at our church website, we have some web links to these questionnaires for your amusement.ⁱ

But don't rely on them, friends. Don't take them very seriously, because the whole lot of these Spiritual Gift Inventories is based on a flawed understanding of what spiritual gifts really are. All of these Spiritual Gift assessments are misunderstanding what the New Testament means by a spiritual gift to begin with.

I know that's bold statement. And, unfortunately, it would take all morning to go through with you the detailed scholarly background for this judgment I'm sharing with you. Again, I'll leave references for that study if you wish to do it on your own, on our website attached to this sermon.ⁱⁱ But at its simplest, the whole argument boils down to this:

The English language has two meanings of the word "gift":

- 1.) The first is a special ability or aptitude one has – as in "she has a gift for language," or "he is a gifted musician- ,
- 2.) The second is an object given from one to another – as in giving someone a birthday gift.

Many Bible students in English speaking lands have understood “spiritual gifts” to have the first meaning, that the Spirit gives one a special ABILITY, a special APTITUDE, say, to teach or heal, as Corinthians says, to prophecy or whatever. This is today’s conventional understanding of spiritual gift and it is what all the Spiritual Gift inventories are based on. The Corinthian “spiritual Christians” would have loved this idea, because it would make them feel special, even superior, in their special ability.

But a deeper study of Paul’s writing will uncover that the real meaning of a spiritual gift, the second meaning, is that a spiritual gift, is any SPECIFIC SERVICE OPPORTUNITY GIVEN BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, some CONCRETE MINISTRY opportunity that the Spirit grants you to do, whether or not you are particularly good at it or not.ⁱⁱⁱ A spiritual gift, is, then, just the positive willingness to do what the Spirit of God gives you to do.... No special abilities required.

For example, most of the church treasurers I’ve known, and many of the church school teachers, and most of the committee members, don’t believe that they are somehow especially talented to do what they do on behalf of the church. Many tried to use that as an excuse not to take on the role! God hasn’t given the Treasurers amazing powers in navigating the complex print functions of Excel spreadsheets; or teachers an undying passion for understanding a 3rd grader’s mind. No, their job is just something that church clearly needs, and God has given them the heart to say “yes” when asked, not because they are uniquely talented for that work, but because they are committed to supporting the Church and the church clearly needs that service. If they receive this service opportunity willingly, it is their spiritual gift.

Look through our roster of church leaders, our teachers, our elders, deacons, women and men who run our committees, who lead our Outreach efforts, who get the work of the church in the world done...even in a congregation as blessed as UCC with fine leaders, everywhere you turn you find individuals who sacrifice their time and who receive their roles with gratefulness as spiritual gifts – as OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE...whether they are especially talented at it or not... who bless others and bless themselves and build up the Body of Jesus Christ.

When I think back to the motley crew we assembled for the painting of a home in East Austin a few months back with Hands on Housing, thank God we had a couple of folks with a sense of what needed to happen and some skills to direct, because most of us were accidents waiting to happen. For us it was an opportunity to serve, no aptitude required.

This second understanding of spiritual gift presumes that there is a wisdom in the greater body of Christ, a wisdom in the whole church, that the individual Christian cannot possibly perceive. That wisdom of the whole church will help us individually fit into a field of service that readily builds the whole Body up. We have said it this way. An individual often senses a call to serve, but it is the community of faith that confirms that call.... or doesn't confirm it.

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Long before the letters PC meant Personal Computer or Political Correctness a financially successful farmer was riding his tractor in his field one sunny day when he looked up, and there was a cumulous cloud formation that clearly formed the letters P C. Being a faithful Christian did not hesitate when given this sign. He promptly sold his farm, and enrolled in seminary where he could study to PREACH CHRIST.

Seminary went fine, but years later when he arrived at his first church, well, the fellow just couldn't preach at all. It was terrible! So problems grew at the little church as people stayed away from church in droves. Finally, the church board met with their floundering preacher. He was so sure that pastoring was his calling. He reminded them of the story of how he had been clearly called to preach. "Well," said of the wise old fellows on the board, "Maybe you misinterpreted God's message. Maybe God wasn't telling you to 'Preach Christ,' but to 'Plant Corn.'"

There's wisdom in the wider Christian community.

Over the last several decades defensively armed with their Spiritual Gifts Inventories, too many Christians in lots of churches have said "no" to nominating committees approaching them to serve in some capacity. They've said "no", "no", "no" feeling good all the time that they aren't serving outside of what they sincerely believe is their intended spiritual trajectory. Important ministry has been left undone. Important lessons in self-giving service have not been learned, because these individualistic Christians have held out for some custom fitted call.

There is nothing wrong with a good, easy fit between one's abilities and one's service arena. But there's nothing necessary about it, either.

Tomorrow's holiday will call us to think more deeply about the Civil Rights movement last century. Consider this: Dec. 1, 1955 sitting down in that Montgomery, Alabama bus, I'm willing to bet that Rosa Parks didn't think of herself somehow an especially talented candidate for racial abuse, when the Spirit called on her to resist the injustice of segregation, by refusing to give up her seat to a white man. I'll bet she didn't feel the best prepared, the most courageous, God's selected one for that perilous task. No, she wasn't given some special power, but she was given commitment.

Of her act of defiance that day, Martin Luther King Jr. said, 'She was not "planted" there by the NAACP, or any other organization; she was planted there by her PERSONAL SENSE OF DIGNITY AND SELF-RESPECT. She was anchored to that seat by the accumulated indignities of days gone by and the boundless aspirations of generations yet unborn. She was a victim of both the forces of history and the forces of destiny. She had been tracked down by the Zeitgeist - the spirit of the time.' And she said yes!

And so did King. Tomorrow, we celebrate the gifts offered our nation by this one man who had a combination of both of these understandings of giftedness. Martin Luther King had(1.) talent and aptitude for his special calling , but more importantly (2.) he had an abiding commitment to the ministry that the Spirit set before him.

"There must be a recognition of the sacredness of human personality,' King insisted. 'Deeply rooted in our political and religious heritage is the conviction that every man is an heir to a legacy of dignity and worth.'

Sounds a lot like Paul's contention that "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

Sounds a lot like Paul's contention that "God has so arranged the body"...that "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."

Martin Luther King reminded us of this deeply rooted hope of God's blessed kingdom us in his term, 'the beloved community.' King taught us that the foundation of the beloved community is a divine indwelling that equally graces all people. He said, 'There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right

of another. Every human being has etched in his (/her) personality the indelible stamp of the creator.' Each human being is incredibly valuable because every human is addressed by God's SPIRIT, and empowered by God's Spirit.

And as Paul put it, every human being is granted an opportunity to receive spiritual gifts, concrete ministry opportunities, which may or may not come with special abilities. What they do come with is a demand upon us, for an answer.

The next time, what will yours be?

ⁱThe following are a few of the plethora of such spiritual gift tests online. I don't endorse any of them.
<http://www.elca.org/evangelism/assessments/spiritgifts.html>
<http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=2268>
<http://www.churchgrowth.org/analysis/intro.html>
<http://mintools.com/spiritual-gifts-test.htm>

ⁱⁱ See especially

“Confusing Word and Concept in ‘Spiritual Gifts’: Have We Forgotten James Barr’s Exhortations?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000): 37-51.

I have not read, but expect the same argument will be made more simply in *What Are Spiritual Gifts? Rethinking the Conventional View* (Grand Rapids:Kregel Academic & Professional). is at <http://www.amazon.com/What-Spiritual-Gifts-Kenneth-Berding/dp/0825421241>

ⁱⁱⁱ See these passages for the sources of this conversation Romans 12:3-8, 1 Corinthians 12:1-31, 1 Corinthians 14:1-40, Ephesians 4:7-16, 1 Peter 4:7-11.