

What Has the Spirit Given You? I Cor. 12 (selected verses) 3/29/20

When I started taking piano lessons in the third grade, I wasn't very excited about it. But in time I began to enjoy the piano, and by the time I was in Middle School and Sr. High, I was practicing one to two hours each day. I played in numerous recitals and competitions, and even played "Rhapsody in Blue" my senior year with our high school band!

My junior year of high school, I began teaching piano. I had always figured that anyone could learn to play it, if they just practiced and worked at it. It turns out I was wrong! Some of my students demonstrated a natural aptitude for the instrument, learning to read music, maintain a tempo, follow dynamic markings, etc. They progressed quickly. Others, not so much. My sister, for example. My mom insisted that I teach her. I'll never forget the pain of listening to her attempts to play a simple version of "Edelweiss." She just could not manage to play it in the correct time signature. I probably didn't help matters by holding my head and groaning loudly, perhaps even rolling on the floor in frustration. Not my finest moment. But no matter how hard she tried, playing piano was always going to be a struggle for her, although she had a lovely singing voice. I learned that there really are such things as natural talents and gifts, and that not everyone is gifted to play the piano!

It turns out that God has made us with different gifts and abilities. And, as we continue our study of the Holy Spirit this morning, we come to a particular kind of gift- gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit. Let's listen to what the Apostle Paul has to say about these gifts in I Cor. 12. *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Cor. 12:1, 4-7)*

So far in this series we've learned that the Spirit gives us boldness to witness, indwells us, helps us at all times, and transforms our character. Here, the Spirit gives us gifts- special abilities to be used for God's service. These gifts are similar to talents, but are used specifically for God's purposes. Paul says that they are given for the common good. They are not to be used to make us feel good or to make us look superior to other people. In fact, since they are gifts from God, there is no room for pride or arrogance about them at all. They are to be used to help others.

And since it is God who activates all of them, if you've got a complaint about the gifts you've been given, or the fact that you lack a certain gift that

you'd really like to have- you've got to take that up with God. God has arranged them all. That's what the passage says.

It also says that each one of us has received at least one of these spiritual gifts. This was one of the most important re-discoveries of the Protestant Reformation! In medieval times, the church had come to believe that only certain people- professional church workers like priests and monks and nuns- had spiritual gifts. Everyone else just received what those folks had to give! But as Luther and other Reformers read the New Testament, in passages like this one they discovered that God had given spiritual gifts to every follower of Jesus! That was a radical discovery, and it transformed their understanding of the church. When the church operates the way God intended it to operate, every member is using their gifts to further God's work in the church and the world. Pastors and other church leaders are still important, but a crucial part of their role is to help others discover and use their gifts, thus multiplying God's work.

So, what spiritual gift has God given you? Paul continues this passage with a sample list. ⁸*To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,* ⁹*to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,* ¹⁰*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. ¹¹*All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.* (I Cor. 12:8-11) Paul gives lists of spiritual gifts in two other places- in Eph. 4 and Romans 12, if you want to check them out. Those lists overlap with this one, but add other gifts such as administration, serving, teaching, giving, leading, and compassion. We could also add gifts in music, art, theater, the sciences, technology, childcare, medicine, elder-care, engineering, and mechanics- any gift used to serve God and others.

In response to a Facebook request, some of you mentioned gifts that you have seen in people at this church: You saw creativity and love for kids in Barb Sanders, faithful caring for our seniors in Beth Fitzpatrick, delight in and patience with our pre-school children in Mary Beth Shoemaker, quiet faith and endless service in Dave Conklin, hospitality in Penny Messinger, and generosity in a church member who helped another member in need by helping to pay for their new furnace. These are just a few of the gifts of the Spirit operating here at GPC!

According to Paul, each and every Christian has been given at least one of these spiritual gifts. But unfortunately, churches often ignore this fact. We fall back into that medieval understanding that only a few people

are gifted and needed in the church. And the church is handicapped by that.

I found a little video that sums up our predicament pretty well. It's a commercial for Fed Ex that spoofs the movie, "Castaway." (SHOW VIDEO) This guy almost died living on that deserted island, when everything he needed to stay alive and be rescued was in the box the whole time! This church has also been given everything we need to accomplish God's work in this place- even to do God's work in a time like this! But we often fail to open up the box and use the gifts we've been given! So, how do we discover and use our gifts?

I think we begin with our interests and passions. If you're interested in music, try out the choir or bell choir or the praise band and see what happens. If you're interested in working with children, help with Sunday School or Youth Club or Vacation Bible School. If you're interested in finances, talk to Hank Har, the chair of our finance committee. If you'd like to teach adults, talk with Cheryl Betts about teaching opportunities with Sunday School or small groups. Start with interests that you have.

Then, get some feedback. If the choir director tells you that he really appreciates your interest in the choir, but that it's obvious you can't carry a tune in a bucket, then it's time to explore another gift! If you try working with young children, but they run away every time they see you coming,

then working with young children probably isn't your gift. Get some honest feedback! And try something else if need be. You're trying to find where your passions, your interests and the needs of the church and the world intersect.

We also have a spiritual gifts class we offer periodically that will help you explore the gifts God has given you. We're planning to offer it on-line in mid-April, so watch the website and newsletter for more information. I'd strongly encourage you to take advantage of it. Those who have participated in it have found it to be life-changing.

Finally, I would remind you that the gifts of the Spirit only work well if they are used in combination with the fruits of the Spirit- those character traits we talked about last week. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, etc. Gifts used with pride or selfishness or churlishness can actually be destructive!

I read recently about a family that has a prized sterling silver tea set. It is quite old and beautifully crafted, and it's prominently displayed in their home. There is only one problem with the tea set. You can't use it to serve tea! You see, it was chemically coated to keep it from tarnishing, and hot water would ruin the finish!

God doesn't need beautifully-gifted Christians who can't be used, who can't handle the hot water, and the routine and not-so-routine bumps and bruises that go with doing God's work in the church and in the world. God has given you gifts. Discover them. And use them for God's purposes in a spirit of humility and service. We need you! Just don't ask me to teach you how to play the piano. I'm pretty sure that's not my gift. Just ask my sister!