***ONE SPIRIT, MANY GIFTS***

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Texts: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 and Matthew 5:14-16

A few years ago during my sabbatical I spent a week just north of San Diego. On one of my day trips I went to the San Diego Zoo which is one of the great zoos in the world. At every turn there is something new to see. As I walked the paths I was struck by the huge diversity of animals with whom we share this planet. The zoo celebrates that diversity with exhibits depicting a wide variety of species – elephants and eagles, rhinos and rabbits, mooses and mouses – the list could go on and on. Even within a species there is a wide variety –

in one corner I saw lions, tigers, leopards, bobcats, jaguars, lynxes, panthers and a host of other cats unsuitable for your den

in another corner chimpanzees, gorillas, lemurs, baboons, orangutans, spider monkeys, and other tree-climbers I had never heard of

around another bend polar bears, grizzly bears, black bears, brown bears, Kodiak bears, everything but Chicago Bears,

and then deer – how can there be so many kinds of deer and every one of them eats hosta!

A zoo is a great place to be awed by the diversity of God’s creative hand. Yet, as I left the gates, I couldn’t help wondering why we find it so easy to celebrate the diversity of flora and fauna, yet strive so hard to seek uniformity among humans. Do we really believe that God intended there to be diversity in all of creation except for us?

The church in Corinth was wrestling with this issue of uniformity and diversity with regard to spiritual gifts. Just thirty years or so after Jesus’ resurrection, these young Christians were trying to figure out what it meant to be disciples of Jesus without Jesus there to guide them. They clearly believed that some spiritual gifts were signs of God’s grace, but they disagreed as to whether all such gifts were divinely inspired, whether some gifts were better than others, and whether any particular gift was essential for one to be a Christian. The Christians in Corinth wanted to be faithful, but they had no one near at hand to help them know what faithfulness looked like. So they wrote to Paul, seeking guidance.

We don’t have their letter, but in the portion of Paul’s letter that we read today, we hear Paul responding to them in two ways. First, he affirms their unity in Christ: “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” It was the same Spirit who inspired faith in each of them. “Jesus is Lord” was the fundamental confession of faith in the early church. It not only affirmed obedient faith in Christ, it also rejected the Roman claim that Caesar was lord! Paul makes clear to them that faith is a gift from God, and they dare not question the source of inspiration that led fellow Corinthians to make their confession of faith! There was one God and one Spirit that led them all to make one and the same confession, “Jesus is Lord!”

Then Paul moves on to the question of spiritual gifts – *charismata* in the Greek – a word rooted in the word for *gift* or *grace*. Spiritual gifts are gifts of grace, and while the gifts may differ, the giver remains the same. “It is the same God who inspires all of them in everyone,” Paul writes. Not all have the same gifts, but all gifts are inspired by the same God. While the gifts differ – and he offers a host of examples – the purpose of the gifts is the same: to serve the common good.

Walter Brueggemann suggests that “the great crisis among us is the crisis of ‘the common good,’ the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny – haves and have-nots, the rich and the poor.”[[1]](#endnote-1) In other words we are all in this together despite what the politicians say, and we are called to use our uncommon gifts for the common good. All gifts of the Spirit are given for that good purpose, says Paul, to be used for the common good – not for individual achievement, personal recognition or selfish fortune. What then are your gifts to be used for that common good?

Renowned preacher Peter Gomes speaks for many of us when he writes:

*Oh, what we would give for a clue as to what God’s will is for us, and what we would do if we knew clearly what our gift was and how we would use it….*[[2]](#endnote-2)

The search for that clarity is the challenge that lies before us. It is the search for the place where God would use you and your gifts, the place where God would

touch the world through your hands or

speak a word of grace from your tongue or

solve a human dilemma with your mind.

It is the place where God can work through you to do what you could not do alone, the place where God can do what God would not do without you. It is that place to which we are called, that place in God’s plan for which we search as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ. It is a place, not of our choosing, but of God’s choosing.

All seems well and good when we agree with God’s choice. But when we disagree, when God calls us to a place we don’t want to go or to use gifts that we don’t want to use, then answering God’s call becomes more difficult. It is tempting to deny our gifts, to deny that God would use us for a purpose that demands more of us than we want to give. That denial has several familiar refrains:

I can’t do that!

Don’t ask me!

Someone else can surely do that better!

I’m too (fill in the blank) busy, tired, old, young, bald…

The excuses go on and on. While sometimes the excuse is genuine and should be honored, often the excuse covers the fear that if we acknowledge our gifts, if we acknowledge what we can do or more accurately what God can do through us, then we have no good reason for declining to put those gifts to work. Faithfulness demands that we acknowledge our gifts, that we accept what Paul says: “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” – to each and every one, including you.

In his inaugural speech, Nelson Mandela addressed the hesitancy to acknowledge and use our gifts, but cast that hesitancy in a new light. In words I have quoted before but are worth repeating, Mandela says:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world….We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not just in some of us, it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.*[[3]](#endnote-3)

Jesus says the same thing in those familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount, “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” In other words, let your light shine to God’s glory by using your good gifts for the common good!

Today nine folks come to be ordained and installed as elders – to offer their gifts, to let their light shine in response to God’s call. What do they say about their gifts and that call? Listen to them.

*We should go out into all the world and spread the good news. How do we do that? We do it with our time, our money, and our talents. We show God’s love to others when they are in need. We do things like adopt and take in those without a home. We support the food pantry. We invite people to come to worship services and dinners with us. We treat people like “us” instead of “them.” We treat people the way they need to be treated instead of the way they deserve to be treated. Why do we do those things? Because Jesus did. (Brandon Cline-Taskey)*

*God does not want us to be all the same. God wants us to share our gifts. God wants us to dwell in “one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.” (Ruth Arnold)*

*I believe that I am constantly growing, changing, being challenged, and being used by God - sometimes when I know it and mostly when I don’t. I believe that God is calling me to use my gifts to minister to the needs of others, but also calling me to listen to those around me to learn and grow in my faith. (Becky Earhart)*

*I have come to a place where I know that faith is more than just believing in God, it is a way of life. God expects me to grow my faith and live my life with humility, gentleness, patience and love. I am working hard to lead the life that God expects. God calls us to discipleship here at Covenant but also every day with everyone. (Jane Lobb)*

*We live in a society where the outside is judged much more quickly than the inside. It is easy in this environment to lose sight of what God has planned for us and the talents God has given us. Too often we fight what God is telling us in the belief that we know best. We also forget to acknowledge that God’s gifts and talents come in many different forms…” (Sally Griffith)*

*I’ve been looking for an opportunity for a while to do more. I think this is part of God calling me to love my neighbor as I love myself. I think God is asking me who will He send to do his work and he’s waiting on me to say, “Send me!” I hope to use this opportunity as a chance to become more comfortable listening to and doing God’s will more. (Lee Clark)*

*I love God with all that is in me. I do not love God for my personal gain or reward, but because God first loved me. Because Christ is my example, it is my mission as a Christian to love the entire world. I ask God, as Saint Francis prayed asking, “Make me an instrument of Thy peace.” I pray that I am a peacemaker in this world promoting the greatest commandment which is love. (Seth Ward)*

*God wants us to work through him for the common good. God wants us to use [our] gifts to help others. (Sarah Riddell)*

*As I consider my Covenant family, I am grateful for the variety of gifts bestowed upon us all by the Holy Spirit. I don’t have to be like anyone else, and I don’t have to do anything alone. I just have to embrace the gifts that God has given me. What are your gifts? (Amanda Campbell)*

It is a good question: What are your gifts? And what will you do with them – or more importantly, what might God do with them through you? That’s the question. What’s ***your*** answer? Amen

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2010, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Gomes, “Hail Mary Full of Grace”, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, p.14 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Nelson Mandela, *Inaugural Speech*, 1994 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)