***A COMMON GOOD***

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

A few years ago while on sabbatical, I spent a week just north of San Diego, reading in the mornings and taking in the sights in the afternoons. On one of my day trips, I went to the San Diego Zoo, 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 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 to being a Christian. The Christians in Corinth wanted to be faithful, but they had no one on site 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 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 confessions of faith! Some of them came to faith in a flash with a Damascus Road kind of experience while others found their faith growing over time until they arrived at that place where they were comfortable in saying: Jesus is Lord! There were different paths, different experiences, but one God and Spirit that led them all to make that same confession of faith. So it is for us – some come to faith in a dramatic conversion experience while others are cradle Christians, steeped in the faith their whole life long. Neither is more valid than the other; God is at work in it all!

Paul then addresses 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. The gifts may differ – and he offers a host of examples – but 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, and we are called to use our gifts – whatever they may be – for the good of all. The common good is not bound by national boundaries, political identities, or religious affiliations. All gifts of the Spirit are given for one good purpose, says Paul, to be used for the common good – not for individual achievement, personal recognition, or selfish gain – but to build up the kingdom of God by building up community.

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 to serve the common good, 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.

That place can be hard to find sometimes. When I was trying to decide whether to stay in law or go to seminary, I set several reasonable deadlines for God, and God missed them all! I was content to follow either path – attorney or pastor – for each was a form of ministry as our Reformed heritage makes clear. But I was frustrated that God was so slow in letting me know which to choose. Finally, I gave up setting deadlines for God – however reasonable those deadlines might be – and let God decide in God’s time. A couple of weeks later the decision became clear at a stoplight on my way to a church league basketball game in Carlisle, PA. I was impatient; but God was patient with me. Can you be so patient? And then, when your call becomes clear, will you go?

It is not too hard to follow when we agree with God’s choice about how we should use our gifts. But when God calls us to a place we don’t want to go, or to use gifts that we don’t want to use, or to serve people we don’t really like, or to do something really hard, then answering God’s call becomes more difficult. It is tempting to deny our gifts, to deny that God would use us for that purpose, in order to reject a call that demands more of us than we want to give. That is what Jonah tried – how’d that work out for him? Our own denials have several familiar refrains:

I can’t do that!

Someone else can surely do that better!

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

We can find lots of excuses. Sometimes the excuse is genuine and should be honored; if it is truly not your gift then maybe you are not called to that service. But often the excuse covers the fear that if we admit 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. As one of my seminary professors phrased it: *We should profess our strengths and confess our weaknesses.* Faithfulness demands that we acknowledge our strengths and offer them in service to God, for as Paul says: “*to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good*” – to each and every one of us, and that includes you! There is something you can do!

In his inaugural speech, Nelson Mandela addressed the hesitancy to acknowledge and use our gifts, but cast that hesitancy in a new light with these words:

*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 gifts – gifts that come from God – for the good of all!

Some years ago in a rural Pennsylvania town near where I grew up, a teenage boy was killed in a tragic automobile accident leaving behind him two distraught parents and four younger brothers and sisters. In the days following his death, friends called with offers of help; food and flowers arrived. Neighbors came and went. The morning of the funeral, a neighbor came to the door, a quiet man who the family did not know well. “I am here to shine your shoes,” he said. What an odd offer – to shine shoes for a grieving family. But that is what he did, and the grieving mother later recalled what a wonderful gift it was. This little-known neighbor recognized a simple need and stepped up to meet it with a specific offer of help – “*I am here to shine your shoes.*” There are varieties of service – to shine the shoes, to bake the pie, to offer a comforting word, to teach the class, to visit the sick, to sing in the choir, to rock the baby, to heal the sick, to write an encouraging note, to be quietly present for a spell – but it is the same Lord who is served, the same Lord who blesses you with whatever gifts you have – and you all have some! Not only in grand public efforts, but also in simple acts of grace we serve the public good – and each is important.

Tomorrow there will be an inauguration of a new president who is an old president too. And our prayer for him and for all in leadership should be that same prayer Paul offers for the Corinthians – that the president may use his gifts not for personal gain or glory, not for retribution or revenge, not for the benefit of one party or nation, but for the common good of all. So may God work in all of us, through all of us, and when necessary despite any of us to serve the public good, and in so doing may God’s will be done here on earth – in every corner of this earth – as it is in heaven. 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)