

Sermon: Gifts for the Common Good  
2 Epiphany, Year C  
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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In today's letter to the Corinthians, we hear just a small part of a conversation. This is true of all of our Epistles really. And we are left to wonder about the part of the conversation not available to us. For any of us who have old family letters or who have read historical archives, this is one of the challenges of old letters: figuring out why things were written and what precipitated these words? Fortunately we have scholars who have helped us to consider what prompted the Apostle Paul to write what he wrote. Much of what was apparently going on in the Corinthian church can be summed up in a word: Division! Division, due to a misunderstanding about the nature of spiritual gifts.

“Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed,” Paul writes. He goes on to explain to the early church how critical it is that they understand the nature of God's gifts. Paul reminds them that they are able to say “Jesus is Lord”, which is essentially the church's earliest confession, because the Spirit enables them to do so. And they have apparently distorted the way they *understood* these gifts as well as the way they *used* their gifts. Evidently some of the gifts, such as speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues, were honored in a greater way than some of the other gifts, suggesting some sort of spiritual hierarchy within the church community. (This may surprise Episcopalians as we are rarely speaking in tongues in our churches!) It appears that some gifts actually implied power and status. What Paul was likely pointing out is that spiritual pride was leading to self aggrandizement and self centeredness, and it was causing the fledgling church to suffer from division.

As the writer from Ecclesiastes says, “There is nothing new under the sun!” Division seems to be a very common word in the news these days. How many instances of division have we seen just in the past few weeks? In the Episcopal Church in Haiti, division has resulted in a contested election of a new bishop, and the ensuing hurt and frustration have been felt throughout the church. We have also heard about our British friends in Parliament across the pond struggling to agree on and carry out a cohesive Brexit plan. We have heard about and been affected by our own federal government shut down, the result of our elected leaders not being able to work out an agreement over the construction of a wall? If our own country's elected leaders in Washington seem at odds with each other, the British may have us beat! At least their legislators seem to yell louder at each other in session! All jesting aside, this is the longest shut down in our nation's history. Real lives are deeply affected by the inability of these bodies to work through their divisions. And on a more individual basis, we all know of or are part of relationships, perhaps in our own families, where divisiveness has caused or is causing incredible pain and hardship.

Division can wreak havoc within countries and families. It did in the early Corinthian church as well as in all kinds of groups two thousand years later. Paul's letter addresses the root of the Corinthians' division and aspires to show them a new way of seeing and using their spiritual gifts that could help them through their divisions and move towards a place of unity. In our culture, when we speak of “giftedness”, we often think about an individual's ability that elevates them above others. Children in our schools sometimes are labeled as “gifted” because of a particular

intellectual ability. And we certainly talk about “gifted” athletes or leaders because of that special skill that makes them stand out or above others. But Paul is talking about a different kind of giftedness here. In this passage Paul makes three major points.

1. Every person who confesses Jesus as Lord *has gifts*.
2. All gifts are to be used for the *greater good*, for the whole community and
3. All gifts are *equally activated* by the grace of God.<sup>1</sup>

He is urging the Corinthians to realize no one is without gifts. But these gifts are not simply for their own benefit but to build up community, to edify the church. Paul writes, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service 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.” Paul goes on to list other gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, and prophecy. It is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather a beginning, a help, so that the Holy Spirit is visible. Later in the same letter he will mention the gifts of teaching, leading and helping. While there are a variety of gifts, the source of all of these gifts is God. And the gifts are not just for an elite few; they are given to all: to Greek and Jew, to slave and free, to women and men, to poor and rich. And the whole purpose for these gifts is not for an individual’s glory but for the common good.

We are called not to underestimate or overestimate our gifts. Isn’t it exciting though to think that God has given each of us gifts, in all their variety, for the building up of the community? Yes, within the church, as Paul indicates, but also beyond. When we hear of division in the days to come (and I mean “when,” not “if”), instead of despairing about it, can we consider what gifts God has given us that may bring about unity within a given group? The gifts we have are meant to unite rather than divide (unless you are a mathematician! 😊)

Perhaps if you don’t know what your spiritual gifts are, we can help each other to figure it out. With the Holy Spirit’s having such a rich and diverse nature, perhaps we can even add to Paul’s list. As I look at you and consider the many diverse ways in which the Spirit is made visible I think I would add: the gift of listening, the gift of humor, the gift of presence, the gift of prayer, the gift of music, the gift of social justice, the gift of writing, the gift of contemplation, the gift of openness, the gift of unconditional love and acceptance.

This is Martin Luther King, Jr.’s holiday weekend. King was well aware of divisiveness in this country over racial injustice and he preached unity out of diversity. He taught about the importance of our aiming to use our individual gifts for the common good. He prayed, “Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself.”

You are part of an amazing body of Christ that shines in a world that needs your gifts, that divisions may be healed and unity and love prevail. May we continue to learn new ways in which we may work for the common good.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Stokes, Karen, Feasting on the Word, p.258.

