

“Concerning Gifts”
February 5, 2023

I Corinthians 12:4-11

In the middle of last month, our Stewardship Board sent out a “Time and Talent” survey to our members. It is an attempt to find out *from* you what you like to do, what you are good at doing. It is an attempt to give *to* you a way to think about how you structure your time, how you might want to use the hours and the days that are given to you.

The Stewardship Board asked that you fill out the survey and return in by January 29—last Sunday! To the many of you who have done this, thank-you. But you know how things can go: the email was left unopened, the survey not completed. Life *is* busy and filled with all sorts of requests and obligations. Please know that our Stewardship Board is very forgiving—and you still fill out the survey.

This morning, then, as January has turned into February, as we move a little further into this year of rebuilding and renewal after last Sunday’s annual meeting, I want to say a few things about time, and talent, and gifts to all of you: you who have filled out the survey, you who have put it off for a little while, and even to you who might never get around to it.

Paul writes to the fractious and sometimes unspiritual, sometimes over-spiritual congregation in Corinth: “Now, concerning *spiritual* gifts.”

I don’t know what it was like for those Corinthians. But for us? When most of us hear those words, our minds go numb and our eyes glaze over.

Spiritual gifts?

What are they?

We know what *gifts* are. After all, we just finished the gift-giving season. We remembered the story of the Magi and the gifts they brought. We learned for ourselves once more, we taught our children again: at their best, gifts are freely given. They come, perhaps, with ribbons, but with *no strings* attached. We might give a gift to thrill or to delight, or simply to make life a little easier or happier—but a real gift is not given as a reward for good behavior or as payment for labor. A gift comes with no expectation of something in return.

We know those great and grand gifts:

This life that we have been given on this earth that is itself a gift to all living things.

The love that comes to us as a gift. The love that we give to others.

We might even consider this congregation a gift, for it was here, waiting, before any of us arrived. And through our many and varied gifts we work to fulfill the hope that it will be here—and stronger—when we are gone.

Gifts we understand.

But when we attach the word “spiritual” to them, suddenly we’re not quite as clear about what is meant.

What is a “*spiritual* gift?”

We think of things spiritual as things that can’t be seen. We might, then, wonder: are spiritual gifts unseen, unrecognized? Certainly, many people have no idea what “spiritual gifts” they have or how those gifts might be received and used.

“There are varieties of gifts,” Paul says, “but the same Spirit.”

Does that help?

It might, if, as one theologian suggests, we think of what we often call the “Holy Spirit” or the “Spirit of God” as the “Spirit of Life.”¹ When we speak of the Spirit of Life, we recall the love of life which delights us. And the power of the Spirit is the living power which this love of life awakens in us.

The Spirit, then, is not a distant, otherworldly *concept* but a channel into better understanding our own *everyday* experiences. We encounter the Spirit at those times when we are consoled in grief, on those occasions when we are encouraged as we go through difficult circumstances, in those moments when we feel a deep and abiding joy.

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Life because it makes us *alive*, not because it is separated from life. The Spirit sets this life of ours in the presence of the living God and in the great river of eternal love. There is a connection between our experience of God and our experience of life.

So, here’s where we might start: We don’t need to think of spiritual gifts as “supernatural” as opposed to our “natural” gifts, our talents and abilities. Gifts *become* “spiritual” when they are put to the service of extending God’s realm of love into the world.

To speak of spiritual gifts is to focus not on the gift as much as on the giver—the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Life. For God is the one who gives all gifts—life, love, this planet. And God is the one who gives us gifts for the building up of the church, for our common good, and for the good of all creation.

So, concerning gifts:

What have *you* received—and how are you using those gifts?

Each one of us brings gifts to this community. Those who teach and those who sing, those who count money and those who visit the sick, deacons and trustees, those who are known as our leaders and those who come here only occasionally. Each person has something unique to offer this congregation. Even if you are visiting here for the first time today, or have begun worshipping here in recent weeks, you bring gifts to this place.

Beyond that, each one of us has something unique to offer the wider world. A desire to advocate for others, skill at organizing, a passion for justice, the ability to cook a meal.

“There are varieties of gifts.” Can we begin to name them all?

No.

Paul’s list of gifts is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. We should understand it simply as *some* possibilities among many.

Any attempt at limiting what is a spiritual gift will be doomed, for the Spirit of God will not be limited.

The main point is this: these are all *gifts*—not something we achieve on our own, they are gifts from God—unique to each person. And let me be clear: YOU have spiritual gifts—from God.

Now, God doesn’t give knick-knacks—you know, things that sit around and collect dust. The gifts you have are meant to be used, not simply put on display.

So, it’s important that each of us identify what these gifts are and put them to use as best we can. That’s why from time to time we take the time to send out surveys like the one the Stewardship Board sent to you last month—as a kind of prompting, a kind of prod; as a way to get you to think a little more intentionally about what you have received and about how you might better use those gifts for your own delight and for the well-being of others.

Martha Graham, one of the great dancers of the last century said: “I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same.”

We learn what our gifts are by using them.

Sing. Teach. Study. Visit. Give. Advocate. Organize. Do what you like. Do what you have the *gift* to do. Do it not just for your own sake but for the common good.

We ventured out this morning to gather once more in the warmth of this community. We recognize once more that even in worry and adversity, there is a particular joy that we find as we come together in this place, in this community that is always made up of both friends and strangers.

And here at the table this morning—look! Gifts!

Bread for strength and the fruit of the vine for gladness.

In a small and particular way this Table holds all of the gifts of God.

In a small and particular way this meal ends our separation from God and one another and also reconnects us with all creation.

In a small and particular way this food and drink offer the nourishment and joy needed that we might once again love our neighbors as ourselves and love this great and fruitful creation which we have so threatened.

This food and drink and meal and table connect to tell a particular story of the way in which God is bringing about a new creation through death and resurrection. And when we tell this story in this way, we are brought back into a right relationship of love with all people who gather to eat at all tables and with all living things that are fed by the care of God.

Here we find the fruits of God's work and the fruits of human work. God's gifts of grapes and grain are, by human actions turned into wine for gladness and bread for strength. Gifts!

When we eat and drink we are connected with those who prepared the food, those who processed the food, those who grew the food, and the earth that produced the food. Gifts!

We hear the invitation: "Take, eat, drink." In these simple daily acts of eating and drinking, we are told again of God's pleasure with us and with all creation.

When we eat and drink, we remember that the Creator God is the One who desires our well-being and delight—and not ours alone, but the well-being and delight of all people and indeed of all creation.

This meal, like all of life, is an occasion of giving and receiving and giving once more.

So, as we come to the table this morning, I invite you to think about these gifts of bread and wine, given freely to us, given in love, given for our strength and well-being, and for the well-being not only of this congregation but of all humanity.

And as you give consideration to these gifts, think again of how you might use the specific gifts that you have received in all their variety.

How will you, in these days, from this place, make use of all you have received?

How will you give to others the gifts that you have been given?

There is one Spirit and there are many gifts.

Put your good gifts to use

ⁱ See Jurgen Moltman, *The Spirit of Life*, esp. pgs. x and 278ff.