

It's What You Do With It!

January 20, 2019

[Scripture Focus: 1 Corinthians 12: 1-11]

SCRIPTURE

Before we take a closer look at the text, let me give you some background. I love the way that the American Bible Society provides this background info. If you're ever searching for this kind of info, take a look online at "biblesources.americanbible.org." Of this text, they say...

What makes 1 Corinthians unique?

Paul's letter to the church at Corinth provides a clear idea of the kind of questions one early group of Jesus' followers faced. It also shows Paul's teaching on a number of issues. This letter is well-known for its chapters that discuss the gifts of the Holy Spirit and for Paul's teaching that love is the best gift of all. Chapter 15 includes Paul's encouraging words about how God has defeated death and promises new life and a "spiritual" body to all who have faith in Jesus.

Why was 1 Corinthians written?

Paul had visited Corinth and spent time there teaching the good news about Jesus. During this time he became close to the followers of Christ who lived in Corinth. He wrote to them because they were his friends and because he'd heard about certain arguments and disputes among them. He was especially concerned about the way the Corinthian Christians were dividing themselves into different groups and about the way they were treating one another. He also wrote to answer their questions about marriage and about whether it was appropriate to eat food offered to idols. They had sent these questions to Paul in an earlier letter. Finally, Paul wanted to let the Corinthian Christians know that he intended to return to Corinth and stay with them for a while.

What's the story behind the scene?

Although this letter is called 1 Corinthians, it is not the first letter that Paul wrote to this church. We know this because he mentions in this letter that he had written one before. The city of Corinth was located on a narrow strip of land that had a seaport to both the east and west. It was a very worldly city influenced by people of many cultures. People who lived in Corinth had a long tradition of devotion to the love goddess, Aphrodite. Paul's letter addresses some of the struggles the Corinthian Christians continued to face because of the many influences present in the city.

Let's take a closer look at the text from 1 Corinthians 12 that Ray read earlier. This morning, I'll be reading from The Message...

What I want to talk about now is the various ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives. This is complex and often misunderstood, but I want you to be informed and knowledgeable. Remember how you were when you didn't know God, led from one phony god to another, never knowing what you were doing, just doing it because everybody else did it? It's different in this life.

God wants us to use our intelligence, to seek to understand as well as we can. For instance, by using your heads, you know perfectly well that the Spirit of God would never prompt anyone to say "Jesus be damned!" Nor would anyone be inclined to say "Jesus is Master!" without the insight of the Holy Spirit.

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all.

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful:

- wise counsel
- clear understanding
- simple trust
- healing the sick
- miraculous acts
- proclamation
- distinguishing between spirits
- tongues
- interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Before we get started, let me clear up a few things. Church folks often reference different things that sound very similar in nature. It's important that we don't confuse these things. Spiritual **gifts** are abilities while spiritual **fruits** are character qualities: such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, humility, integrity and self-control. Every disciple should have all of the fruits of the spirit but no disciple has all of the spiritual gifts. Spiritual gifts are abilities given to us by the Holy Spirit that are helpful when it comes to creating or strengthening the community of Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 Paul mentions the following spiritual gifts:

- *The word of wisdom*
- *The word of knowledge*
- *Faith*
- *Gifts of healing*
- *Workings of miracles*
- *Prophecy*
- *Discerning of spirits*
- *Different kinds of tongues*
- *Interpretation of tongues*

If this doesn't seem like a comprehensive list of all of the spiritual gifts, know that he mentions these merely as examples, and later in the chapter he adds:

- *Gifts of helping*
- *Gifts of administration*

SO WHAT?

We read this scripture and learn that each of us has been given a special gift by God. Your first question may be "How do I even know what my gift is?" Personally, I see being a part of a faith community as vital for identifying our gift.

If you have a particular spiritual gift, my guess is that SOMEONE from your congregation will say something like "you really seem to have a gift for _____."

While that person may not be trained in this area, they may be spot on when it comes to identifying spiritual gifts. That person may also simply need someone with that particular gift to do something at the church and see you as a way to mark that off of their to-do list.

As a Presbyterian, we strongly believe that there's power in numbers. If you have SEVERAL people mention that you have a particular spiritual gift, it's likely that you really do have it.

There are also a number of online surveys that are helpful in identifying spiritual gifts. I really like the one that Team Ministry: Gifted to Serve offers online. The site info (gifts.churchgrowth.org) is listed in Sermon Notes section of today's bulletin insert. It is a very comprehensive survey and it is free but they do ultimately ask for your e-mail address. They're not afraid to contact you - by e-mail but that stops in a day or so or when you unsubscribe from their mailings.

NOW WHAT?

When preparing for our discipleship class this week, I read that "Faith is personal but not private." Once again, personal and private may sound similar but they're really not. These words definitely aren't interchangeable!

In this case, when you hear that "faith is personal but not private;" you should realize that personal faith (faith based only on my beliefs) would indicate that I may share my personal faith with others or keep it private (only for myself or for sharing with a very exclusive group - like me and my family).

While your spiritual gift is personal (everyone doesn't have your gift; different folks have different - personal - spiritual gifts) whether you decide to keep your personal spiritual gift private, is up to you.

You should be aware that spiritual gifts are given with the expectation that they'll be used for the common good (meaning "not kept private"). It seems that keeping your spiritual gift from others is not following God's call on your life. We're gifted by God's Spirit as individuals for the sake of community. So, what's most important may not be the nature of your spiritual gift. What's most important? It's what you do with it!

When considering spiritual gifts, the first step (even before identifying or receiving the gift) is to actually want the gift. So often, we think that we're too busy to receive or act on a gift from God. We set our own limits because we don't really want to be used by God. Maybe we're afraid; afraid of what others might say or we're afraid of failure; we could be fearful of looking silly; maybe we're even afraid that acting on the gift will end up with us getting hurt. All of these things could prevent us from getting past the wrapping paper!

One may wonder where the thought of trusting God (the God who actually gave you the gift) is in this equation. My sense is that if God has given you a spiritual gift, God will also help you determine when and how you are to use it...

I'm not much of a risk-taker. I always go for the fixed rate mortgage. I'd never take a chance on doing something that bordered illegal when filing my taxes. If you make an appointment to meet me for lunch at 11:45, I'll be there early because I don't want to take a chance of getting stuck in traffic and being late. But truth-be-told, when God has given you a gift, you've got to become trusting and be a bit of a risk taker.

As we learned during Advent, there's a big difference in making a covenant with God to do something and signing a contract with a contractor to do some work at your home.

God's got your back - no matter what. The contractor is likely more interested in having your money... When it comes to acting on your spiritual gift(s), stretch yourself. Feel free to go beyond your usual limits. Trust God. God will always be faithful! When God asks you to do something, don't start with a zillion reasons why you can't do it. Trust God! Just do it!

When you're praying with someone who's sick, just say what's on your heart. For most of us, there's this reality that *fear says "What if I fall flat on my face?" Faith says "just do it - God's got your back!"* As we begin to walk in faith (and not by sight), we realize that we don't have to be perfect. We just have to be faithful and to try. Rely on God to get you through whatever you fear.

As you leave here today, I encourage you to ask yourself “what have I been doing with the gift that God’s given me?” For so many of us, the answer may be “nothing.” If your answer is “nothing,” then ask yourself “what would Providence look like if every member of this faith community acted like me?” There may not be much going on... So, would the world be a better place if each of us simply trusted God to lead us to make a difference in this hurting world? Absolutely!!!

Let’s agree to pray for one another this coming week. First, let’s ask God to help us identify the specific spiritual gifts that we’ve each been given. Then, let’s ask for God to help us hear what we are to do with these gifts. Don’t hide your gift. After all, what’s really important may not only be the gift but also what we do with it! Trust God. He’ll never let you down. Amen.