

Gifted
from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: I Corinthians 12:1-11

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The spirit is the source, as in, “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are varieties of service, but the same Lord. There are many forms of work, but all of them, in all men, are the work of the same God. In each of us the Spirit is manifested in one particular way, for some useful purpose.” (I Cor. 12:4-7).

Thus writes Paul, about the source of all spiritual gifts, to the young church at Corinth. There are growing signs of infighting and competitive efforts to show certain persons blessed with gifts that are superior to others. Paul will have none of it and directs their attention back to the source of all human gifts, namely: God’s Spirit within those individuals.

What are your gifts of the Spirit? Do you think of yourself as a gifted individual with abilities, or insight, or talents that could be useful to the church as it pursues its mission? Or do you take the self-effacing route and claim, with false modesty, a lack of any gifts and, thus, a bullet-proof excuse for avoiding discipleship.

I notice among those willing to recognize that God has given them gifts, a readiness to share their talent while remaining genuinely modest about having done anything to deserve their particular gifts. Hard work and self-discipline have made them accomplished in a particular area but they take no credit for the abilities that God has given them. Such abilities allow them to be accurate interpreters of the faith, or especially talented in leadership, or in community service, or in teaching, or...in whatever they pursue as expression of their gifts. These folks seem to

recognize that the source of all this ability is none other than God's creative Spirit at work among even them.

Such recognition and celebration of gifts is contagious and such a contrast to either the atmosphere that Paul encountered in Corinth where competition and put-downs were the mode, a climate in which everyone is so reluctant to claim their gifts that nothing much happens in the church. When there is joy over celebrating a variety of gifts you can sense it in the church. If you visit such a church you hear people freely talking about how much they are learning while teaching children, or you hear them report how rewarding it has been to be engaged in regular community service, or you are caught up in their enthusiasm for the possibilities of growth in the Spirit that have come their way through disciples in Bible study and prayer.

There is, in such a faith community, an enthusiasm for what God's Spirit is accomplishing through them. They are like the people portrayed in Dirk Wirenga's recent book about the variety of ways one can serve as a Presbyterian in this country. If you haven't seen this large-format book entitled, *The Spirit of Presbyterians*, take a look at it in the church library. You will be impressed by its colorful display, in words and pictures, of our Presbyterian church in its many forms across this land. You will meet a contractor who builds churches at reasonable cost; a doctor on a Navajo reservation, a leader of small groups in her church, a lawyer who is now a theological student, a seminary graduate who is now director of a social service agency. These people are familiar to us because they are present in this and other congregations we have known. They consider their gifts too good to waste, too needed by others to deny, too exciting in their expression to hide under a bushel basket called false modesty. These are gifts from God that remind us how God works wonders in the world. God does this through followers who are willing to bear testimony to God's presence in their lives.

So often the gifts we wish we had are not the gifts that are needed. That is, we usually focus on the celebrity gifts – good looks, superior intelligence, lots of money, athletic ability, great health – when what is really needed by others in our community of faith, our neighborhood, or work place is the very gift we have but don't recognize.

You may be a good listener but you are so accustomed to your good practice of listening and hearing without interrupting that you do not realize how rare it is to find someone with your gift.

You may be intuitive and understand better than most how others are probably experiencing life. You know what it is to be in someone else's shoes and to face the ups and downs of living as they do. But you may not appreciate this gift since it is such an integral part of who you are. You may even be heard to say, "Well, doesn't everybody do this?" The answer is, "No". You are gifted with a special ability that is much too rare.

You may have the gifts of common sense. You can say what you think about a wild and crazy idea for the company's expansion in future markets. Later, others come to you and thank you for calling it like you see it...and for saving the company a lot of money.

On the other hand you may have the gift of vision and the courage to stick to your dream until the day when others come around to a place where they can see what you saw long ago. You know Yeats was onto something when he said, "In dreams being responsibility."

And though you are not quoted as frequently as Yeats or other poets, there is a certain wisdom that wells up from deep within your soul which others seek for guidance. You are not all-knowing but you seem to know the questions to ask to further someone else's own thinking in order that they can come to a decision. You are wise and resourceful. You run deep as the wells that bring the waters of life.

So we begin to consider unrecognized gifts that have always been ours but were never acknowledged. Rather than assume that everyone is as disciplined as we, that everyone is as wise as we or that everyone is as intuitive as we are, we now see how God has blessed us in particular ways. Such gifts are not earned or even learned. They are given and, if we will recognize them, they can be nurtured and developed and shared for the benefit of others.

There is a woman we know in another part of the country who has what I will call the gift of placement. She knows how to guide people toward relationships and positions of service where they will contribute their gifts. At the same time they will grow in stature in their own mind and in the minds of others. She does this with no ulterior motive. She does this with no expectation of reward save the joy of seeing others find a way to make a contribution to a relationship or a cause that is bigger than both of them. She says things like, "You really need to meet so and so because he is about to start a project that is in need of someone with your interests." Or she might say, "I think that this church (or school, or community) needs a program for (blank) and with your interest in (blank) you

ought to be on the task group to plan it.” You didn’t know you had such a talent but, thankfully, someone else did and helped you to recognize your gift. This person is an agent of God’s Spirit of creativity, intelligence, imagination and love.

The only other consideration that is necessary, I believe, is the question of “source”. What is the source of this gift you have now been assisted in recognizing and embracing? Is it something you have developed the way people develop big muscles? Is it a talent you have cultivated the way people cultivate their connections to persons in high places? Or is this simply, yet profoundly, a gift given to you by none other than your creator which you do not dare waste, hide or deny much less take credit for creating? It is, I believe, the latter: a gift to embrace while giving thanks to God, the source of all good gifts.

We are, in the words of Paul, members of the one body of Christ. We are individuals with particular gifts but all are part of a whole and each contributes to the effectiveness of the whole. No gifts are more important than others just as the eye is no more important than the hand. Each is important in its own right. So, says Paul, just as we are warned against touting one gift more important than another, so we are warned about denying our own gifts because they may not be as celebrated as others. Each one is important to the whole community. The community is only as strong as each of its parts. The community needs each of us to make the contribution of our gifts of the Spirit.

If you are still unsure of your gifts of the Spirit you might consider praying to God, the source of all such gifts, to make you aware of those that are yours. You might consider asking trusted friends what they see as your unique gifts. If you are part of any small group in the church you might let this matter of gifts be a subject for discussion and then conclude by affirming the gifts we see represented in one another. And if that sounds too far beyond your level of comfort just try bringing the subject up with a best friend or a family member or a husband or wife. You will be surprised that the affirmation that comes your way. You will be motivated to do more with your gifts. You will see yourself with new appreciation. You will praise God, the source of all Spiritual gifts and you will be amazed at how creatively God has expressed the very love which gifts life, through none other than you.