

*Sermon:
Sunday, October 18, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart*

Imagine a mosaic of First Unitarian Church. The image for this year's stewardship campaign is just that: a mosaic image of the meetinghouse. But I'm thinking of a mosaic of the inside. What would a mosaic of our church look like? That mosaic would need to be large. It would show our stately interior spaces, and maybe there would be an abstract section that would represent the beauty of the music. There would be children learning and eating snacks and playing Quadball at Wiogora. Most of all, there would be so many people: doing the everyday tasks of justice work, singing together, making meals, comforting one another, laughing together, sitting in silence without needing to fill it, making spaces beautiful, and building multigenerational community. And, let's be honest, there would be some people disagreeing with each other (or the sermon!), people trying to do the right thing and missing the mark, and people wondering what the right thing even is. It would be an intricate, honest, and beautiful mosaic.

We are that church and we are those people. The church community is made up of all of us, our gifts and our struggles. And rather than being made of chips of stone and mortared in place, the church is a living community, inspired by the sacred to be more than the sum of its parts. The church is the people who founded the Second Parish, the people who have worshiped here for generations, ourselves today, and the people yet to come. Not only do we worship here, but we make the decisions that guide the values and priorities of the congregation. Each of us has a role to play. Each of us

brings gifts, and each of us must be conscious of the shadow side of those gifts.

Together, the people are the church.

Long ago, in one of the first churches animated by the spirit of Jesus, Paul of Tarsus enumerated the spiritual gifts of the community. He was writing to the Corinthians in the example we heard this morning, although he offered slightly different lists to the church in Rome and the church in Ephesus. The church in Corinth was large and successful (about 50 people), and included people of a mix of wealth and worldly status. Paul's enumeration of spiritual gifts may have been intended to point out that everyone had gifts, even the poorer or less educated members of the church. Paul emphasized that every person had a gift to give. These spiritual gifts still ring true for our community, with a little translation. What is your gift in our church today?

First there are the prophets. The prophets have their ear to the ground and their eyes on the world to come. They know the truth; it liveth. They proclaim the good work that we can do on behalf of our mission. They are engines of justice work and inclusion. Their gift is fearlessness and clarity of vision. They need to beware of self-certainty, and remember to listen to others. In a democratic church, no one has a monopoly on truth.

Then, Paul lists, there are those who have the ability to distinguish between spirits. Paul may have been thinking of those wise in the ways of angels and devils; today these wise discerners are those who exercise good judgment of character and ideas. They keep the long view. They lend their support to a promising project, yet they don't hesitate to let go of something that's not working. They are boundary-keepers, rousing members to defend the church when its life or its heart are on the line. Their gifts are discernment and understanding. They must remember that good spirits

sometimes speak to other people in surprising ways, and not to let habit stand in the way of vision.

Paul emphasizes the gifts of wisdom and knowledge. I think of the people in the church who lend their expertise and the care to go along with it. The volunteers who tend our historic building; those who manage the finances; musicians who make beautiful music; those who, when asked to bring their hard-earned skill to the church, do so with gladness. Every technical or specialized role is a gift. Their strengths are expertise, precision, and understanding; through them the church does its work well. Their challenge is to remember that the church's mission of love and service must sometimes outpace its systems. New systems may need to be built around an expansive embrace.

There are the healers in the congregation. They visit when someone is sick or injured. They offer a kind word or—sometimes more important—a compassionate silence. They bring a hot dinner after a surgery or offer a ride to come to church. Some are healers by profession, and give good advice in the face of worry and fear. Other healers teach the movement of the breath and the connection to the spirit. Yet others heal the rifts that form in the body of the congregation itself, reminding parties who find themselves locked in argument that we are all part of one sacred whole. The gifts of healers are kindness, skill and compassionate regard. Healers must be careful to trust the ability that even hurt people can heal themselves. This can be the source of their greatest strength.

In another list of spiritual gifts, in his letter to the Romans, Paul mentions several more. There are teachers, a spiritual gift every church needs. Like those of you who

volunteered to teach one of our children's classes this year, teachers offer the gift of their love and their presence as much as the gift of their knowledge. Teachers for all ages bring people together to deepen community and to learn from one another. There are those teachers who pass on the wisdom of church heritage and history from one generation to the next, or from one era of leadership to the next. The gifts of teachers are generosity, knowledge, and wisdom. Teachers must remember to let new information and perspectives in; even when we are teachers, we are learners, too.

There are the gifts of serving and leading. In a democratic church, we take turns with these gifts, sometimes on the same Sunday. To draw on a source that is very different from Paul's letters to the early church, the feminist mystic, witch and leader Starhawk writes that this sharing of leadership and followership is the hallmark of a democratic community. She writes, "In *hierarchical* groups, all roles are filled by one person or a small elite, who are rewarded more highly than others. The leader, the "king," may be the brains, the mouthpiece, [and] the drive, of a group." But we have no kings here. Rather, we are a non-hierarchical group. She goes on,

In a group in which everyone has immanent value, fulfilling certain roles does not set one apart from the group or establish anyone as being intrinsically more valuable than others. The role we fill may be valuable and vital, and we may be appreciated for performing it well. But our inherent value does not depend on the performance of our role, and our leadership does not diminish anyone else's value (276).

The gifts of leaders are communicating, charting, visioning, informing and listening. Their shadow is believing, even a little, that they are the King after all. The gifts of

followers are supporting, questioning, improving, trusting, and working together. Their shadow is forgetting that they, too, can be leaders. We are all followers and leaders in our turn.

There are some gifts that Paul left off his list, in my opinion. He does not talk specifically about children, and children have spiritual gifts unique to their stage of life. Children are not the recipients of the church's ministry. They are, in age-appropriate ways, contributors to the church's ministry. Everyone has a spiritual life. In their play and their wonder, their kindness and their exploration, the spiritual life of children and youth is part of the church community as a whole. The gifts of children are presence without pretense, honesty, and a new perspective. If they have a shadow, perhaps it is that they reveal just how much—or how little—patience and long-term thinking the adults around them really have.

I also think that seekers and questioners share spiritual gifts with the church. They may be newcomers, or they may be regulars who are still finding their place. Seekers are the forming edge of our creedless faith. They may be with us for a while and then move on, or they may be part of the new community we are always becoming. In a Unitarian Universalist congregation, seekers are not a problem to be solved but an ongoing and vital presence.

There are more gifts from the early church that matter to us today. The first is the gift of mercy. The merciful are a gift to every community in which they find themselves. They understand. They forgive. They are secure in themselves so that they can cherish other people without rancor, even when those people are difficult—and we're all difficult sometimes. They remind the church of its mission to serve all of our neighbors. They do

not interpret pain as meanness. They offer love and kindness. Mercy is a gift we can all grow in ourselves; without it, we would be a sorry church indeed. The gifts of the merciful are manifold.

They are balanced by those who have the gift of justice, and who understand that clarity and fairness allow everyone to participate equally in the life of the church. They question how cultural norms and historical precedent may be excluding people from our church today. They write bylaws and ask that the rules be followed. They make sure that the welcome of the church is just as wide as we proclaim it to be. They see humanity in every human being. The gift of justice helps us work for a better world for all. Mercy and justice balance each other's shadows: mercy ensures that we always seek to be kind; justice ensures that everyone has equal access to that kindness.

The final gift enumerated by Paul is generosity. He only mentions it in his letter to the Romans; and not coincidentally, the letter to the Romans is a fundraising letter. And in the gift of generosity, Paul touches on the heart of Jesus' teaching, that we share our blessings with one another. Generosity is everyone's gift. As the Buddhist teacher said in the reading this morning, giving reconnects us to the interconnected web of all existence. What we own is only borrowed from the universe; what we give returns to the whole and breaks down barriers between human beings. This is why giving feels joyful! Through generosity, we enact our essential oneness with the universe.

All my neighbors are wonderful gardeners; I'm lucky if my basil succeeds. Once a neighbor brought me tomatoes from her abundant vines; a whole bowl of late summer sweetness in a summer where I hadn't even tried to grow tomatoes. I gave her back a plate of cookies we had just made; both gifts freely given. Then every time I ate one of

her tomatoes I was reminded of the joy of giving her the cookies. It was as if that was why we had made the cookies, to give them away. I'm already looking forward to Halloween and handing out candy and stickers to the trick-or-treaters at the door. Giving connects us to one another and dismantles the walls that separate us. It reminds us that the earth's abundance belongs to all beings to share. Generosity returns us to the truth that we are not separate from each other, but are bound in one living whole.

In this church, as I say every Sunday, your generosity makes our ministries possible. When you volunteer to teach Sunday school, or work with a committee, or greet patients at the Hart-Wood medical program, or fix a broken window, or sing in the choir, or make a meal for lunch or for someone homebound, or comfort a friend, you are giving yourself to the whole. And when you give financially, your gifts pay our staff, buy supplies for our ministries, support Unitarian Universalism across the country, and fund the systems that keep us connected to one another. You make the work of the church possible. Throughout the coming year, when you receive the spiritual gifts of your fellow church members and friends, you will experience the joy of your own gift all over again.

Everyone has a gift to give. Everyone has the living spirit inside them that is part of the greater whole. I wonder when you have felt yourself most alive and most connected. What is your gift that, when given, returns you to oneness with the interdependent web? When have you received such a gift? This blooming spirit in you, this life force that wants to give itself away in connection with others, this is the spirit of the Church. I invite you to join me this year in giving your gift to this religious community, so that we can connect, and serve, and worship, and give to the world in our turn. I love you all. Amen.

Sources

Thanks to the Rev. Michael Leuchtenberger for his sermon “Our Roles in the Village,” preached at the Northern New England Chapter meeting of the UU Ministers Association, 15 Apr. 2026.

Starhawk. *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990.