

Sermon for Day of Pentecost 2019
Uncommon Gifts for the Common Good

Someone once said—
Yesterday is the past.
Tomorrow is the future.
Today is a gift.
That's why it's called the present.

Okay, this saying is corny but we get the point.
Today is a gift.

Most of us love gifts and
today we celebrate the gift of the Spirit.
What is more, we celebrate the many gifts
that receiving the gift of the Spirit bestows in our lives.
That's a lot of gift giving!
It puts me in mind of Christmas morning.
Gifts piled high around the Christmas tree.
We celebrate the gift of God's son, Immanuel,
by receiving and giving gifts to one another.
It's the baby Jesus' birthday—but *we get* the gifts!
It's the same at Easter—
we celebrate the gift of God's ultimate act of love and forgiveness
with . . . gifts to each other.
God is a gift-giving God.
In fact, *all that we have* and *all that we are* is a gift from God.

The world tends to honor some gifts more highly than others.
And if the world honors or values our gifts,
we are often accorded a higher status than others.
Actually, we all honor some gifts more highly than others;
and we also honor the holders of some gifts
more highly than other people.
We give special status to people with particular gifts,
and sometimes we even envy those people.

We live in a society in which it is all too easy
to take pride in personal gifts,
and all too easy to envy the gifts of others –
because the world we live in
believes that gifts are gifts to and for a single person.
And, yet, as Christians who confess that Jesus is Lord . . .
we know that these gifts are meant to be shared,
they are given so that we might have something to give to others.

As the Apostle Paul wrote:
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.
We have been given *un-common gifts* for the common good.

A wise person once said
what makes a person gifted
is not the grades they received in school
or even the great wealth or success they may achieve in life,
but *being gifted* is actually
a different way of looking at the world
and a different way of living in the world.
To that I say an enthusiastic yes!

To be gifted by the Spirit does mean
that we will have a different way of looking at the world
and a different way of living—
through the eyes of faith, hope and love—
not just for our own benefit,
but for the common good of all.

Sadly, for many of us, this “common good” stuff may be an obstacle.
We are called and claimed by the Spirit as individuals
but we are baptized into a unique community which is the body of
Christ.

At the very point of our baptism,
or at the public affirmation of our baptismal vows
when we confirm our faith,
or when all of you became members of this congregation,
you and I are joined with a group of people—
with a great variety of gifts to share,
but also, we must admit,
a great variety of personality flaws and foibles.
(We are sinning saints, after all.)

Being bound to that group,
being bound to the church, the body of Christ,
we are bound to live in love from that day forth.
That is what it means to be a baptized believer:
we become a member of the body,
Christ's body,
and as a member of the body,
we are called to serve others and serve the world.

This is why we are given gifts:
gifts of wisdom,
of prayer,
of music-making,
of creativity of all kinds,
of boldness and courage,
of discernment,
of witnessing,
or hospitality,
generosity, and so much more.
It is as members of the body that you are given the gifts
that are needed for this body to serve in this time and this place.

Fruit bearing trees provide great nourishment and extend great benefits
to us human beings, to animals and birds and a wide variety of creatures.

But the trees themselves only benefit from the fruit they produce by sharing—giving it entirely away—to others.

In a similar way, your gifts (the fruits of the Spirit) are not given to solely for you individually, for your own advancement or for your personal success—not that that is entirely unimportant.

It's just that your personal success and advancement isn't an end unto itself.

Your gifts (the fruits of the Spirit) are given to and for the community—

For the success and advancement of others as well—
for the good of all.

But here's something very important to remember, because for those who have felt the unbearable pressure “to succeed” or who have felt like failures, or can't see their way forward; for those who have tried to make something of themselves and seen it all turn into a heap of ashes—to those who feel lonely or feel that they can't pull themselves up by their bootstraps and stand on their own two feet—the gift of the Spirit is for you too because you can lay all those burdens down.

God doesn't love us for our achievements and God doesn't judge us for our failures.

We don't need to prove anything and we don't need to go it alone.

Instead, we are invited to come

bringing the gifts that you are and have,

and the gifts that were conferred upon you at your baptism.

Bring them into community,

and let God use them for God's purpose.

Because when God takes everyone's gifts –
when God stitches all of us and all these gifts together –
we form the body of Christ.

When we join together in worship, work and play and service,
then Christ himself is made manifest in the world.

Oddly enough, it is precisely when we give up
trying to forge our own identity,
when we submit our gifts and ourselves
to the body of Christ, that our true identity will be revealed,
the identity we took on when we were baptized.

As the body continues to take shape and grow,
we will continue to unearth new gifts,
surprising gifts—in ourselves and each other.

We will forge identities far richer,
far more familiar
and far more satisfying
than anything we could have imagined for ourselves.

So how can we use our uncommon gifts for the common good?

First, we can pray.

Every single one of us is capable of praying.

Our prayers do not have to be long or wordy
in order to be heard by God.

And prayer matters,
whether we are praying
for healing and comfort for the injured, dying or mourning,
or praying for the strength and health of our family
or our church, or our nation, or praying for our enemies
as Jesus has commanded us to do.

Prayer is a gift, prayer matters,
and every one of us can pray.

And—remember—when we do not know how or what to pray,
the Spirit prays with us and for us,
with sighs too deep for words.

Second, we can learn.

Every relationship is enriched
when we make a deliberate decision
to deepen our knowledge or understanding.

We can learn about our own neighborhoods and communities
and what their special needs and challenges are.

We can learn as much as we can about scripture—our book of faith—
and deepen our connection with the stories of our faith community.

(Hint to Maggie and Jenna:

This doesn't stop when we have completed
our two years of Confirmation studies!)

Third, we can speak—honestly, openly, respectfully, lovingly.

Each one of us has a wealth of knowledge,
experience and insight that is ours alone.

No one else brings to the table precisely
the same blend of experiences and learning as you do.

So, if there is a moment of discernment or decision making,
whether here in this community,

or in a family, or in the town, county, or state,
our individual voices are a precious, irreplaceable gift—
especially when we use our voices
to make peace and to do justice.

Fourth, we can search ourselves
to learn what other unique gifts we can bring
to each and every situation and circumstance.

Maybe we can bring our monetary gifts.

Maybe we can bring our mind.

Maybe we can bring our muscle or courage.

The possibilities are limitless!

But only if we unwrap those gifts
and determine we will use them for the common good.

All of these—praying, learning, speaking and self-reflection—
All these help us, equip us and make every interaction,
every relationship we have to try to make things better,
to help make something good happen.
God bestows the right gift for each of us.
God brings all the wisdom of the ages,
and infinitely more, to the project.
God knows us intimately
and knows the circumstances of our lives,
and at last, God settles on it:
this gift is not only exactly what we need individually,
but God knows we will be able to use it to bring joy,
not only to ourselves,
but to those around us for the sake of the world.

When God is finished giving this gift,
it is a vision— God’s vision for us.
And it’s good, no its very good!
With joy and excitement, at precisely the right moment,
God presents it to us, we who are God’s own beloved.

What I say to Maggie and Jenna right now, I say to all of us—
Confirmation, making a public affirmation of our faith,
is not like passing an exam.
It is more like receiving the gift of a passport,
so you are ready for travel, ready for adventure.
God is inviting you to embark for yourself, on the journey of faith.
In Confirmation you are responding, saying
“Yes, I’m ready for the path ahead—
and I will make my journey as a member of the body of Christ.
I will use my gifts as a citizen of his kingdom.
I know that whatever I do and wherever I go, Christ goes with me.
I’m ready to use my gifts and my life for the good of all,
to manifest the kingdom of God.”

Luther tells us that our faith is a gift—
a gift of the Spirit—
the Spirit who has called us through the gospel,
the same Spirit who enlightens with us many gifts,
the one Spirit who keeps us holy and united as the body of Christ.

So, what will you and I do?
Will we reach out our hands?
Will we accept these gifts with joy?
Will we unwrap the gifts God has given us,
and find out how we can share and give it back?
Thanks be to God . . .
there's no better time than today to open the present!