

“Discerning Our Gifts”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
January 20, 2013

1 Corinthians 12: 1-11

This portion of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is one of the most influential parts of Scripture which we have in the life of the church. Paul speaks to a church in its infancy which is struggling with how to live as Christ's disciples, and throughout its history the Church universal has looked to this letter for guidance and wisdom. Over the next three weeks, we are going to read from the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of 1 Corinthians, looking more closely at how Paul's words might speak to us today about discerning our spiritual gifts, and how we use those gifts to build up the Body of Christ.

As I read these two chapters from 1 Corinthians, I've also reflected on how this scripture speaks to me and to us as we approach a time of Sabbath and renewal three months from now. How do we discern what gifts God has bestowed on us, and the best ways to share those gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ? How can this upcoming time of renewal be useful and meaningful – to me, to you, to us – as we seek to grow deeper in our faith?

To begin, in our life as the church, we tend to assume that some gifts are more important or more valuable than others. We see someone up-front assisting with worship, and we can't imagine what we can do is as important. We see others sing, or teach, or serve, and we feel inadequate with the set of skills we think we possess. It's very easy to believe that certain spiritual gifts are more valuable to God than others.

It was exactly that mindset that Paul was addressing when he wrote to the church in Corinth. Dennis Ormseth describes the situation in this way:

The Corinthian congregation, like others in the early church, had been powerfully blessed with gifts of the Spirit. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues make up Paul's list here. Some of these gifts, or the Corinthians' use of them, were of special concern to Paul. Taken to be a demonstration of the believer's possession of special spiritual power, speaking in tongues had apparently become the mark of a spiritual elite within the congregation. Inequality in this gift was being taken by some to mean inequality in relationship to God . . . Paul comes quickly to the heart of the issue. Ecstasy and other individual religious experiences are common to pagans and Christians alike. The distinctive mark of Christian identity, however, whether ecstatic or otherwise, is the public confession that “Jesus is Lord.”

This common confession is authorized by “one and the same Spirit” which also inspires the gifts distributed individually to believers, but always for the common good. The gifts to individuals, Paul wants to make clear, are therefore united both with respect to their source – the one Spirit – and in their purpose, namely, “for the common good” (12:7). The gift of faith which authorizes the confession also confers membership in a community which is finally the real recipient of the gifts which come through various individuals. Those who confess Christ become one body, with many members, each endowed with spiritual gifts (12:12). Paul's chief concern is clear: the members of the Corinthian congregation, which had no ethnic, social, or political bonds and could therefore be easily

polarized and fragmented, needed to appropriate the unity which was theirs in God's action upon them.

The import of this lesson for our contemporary context should also be quite clear. In a society in which bonds of family, ethnic group, and local community are regularly broken by the geographical and social mobility of the people, a sense of the church as community does not come easily. Indeed, because of the powerful emphasis on individual achievement endemic to our culture, congregations are commonly regarded as being held together by individuals with special spiritual endowments, and so tend to take on the characteristic traits of those individuals.

Paul's understanding of Christian community runs directly counter to this typical pattern. By emphasizing one gift over others, the power of every other gift to build up the church is diminished. On the other hand, when all gifts are held equally to manifest the one Spirit who authorizes a common confession of Jesus as Lord, and to empower service to a common good, a more genuine and full community in the Spirit can be realized. In the context of American culture, an exclusive church with a homogeneous membership gathered around a strong leader with a distinctive spiritual gift may be more successful in the competition for members because of its match with the cultural selective principle, but it will not provide for the participating membership the experience which Paul regards as characteristic.

The church is called to manifest an inclusive Spirit in every aspect of its life. No gift can be discouraged or refused by the leadership, nor its bearer excluded from the membership. All Christians have spiritual gifts, and all rightfully can expect to have these gifts put to use in the community (*"Showing the Body," Word and World, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, © 1986: pp.97-104*).

As Presbyterians, this is a core belief in our understanding of discipleship: that everyone has a gift to contribute to strengthen the church. When we ordain and install women and men as officers in the church, they are not ordained to rule over us. We are called to serve alongside them and to serve in a particular function for the larger body. We are not called to hierarchy; we are called to empower one another with the gifts of the Spirit which we all possess. The church cannot depend solely on a few individuals to survive, for those few cannot possibly have all the gifts necessary for the church to flourish. Only when we all recognize and all contribute our spiritual gifts to the Body of Christ will we witness how it is the one Spirit which activates these gifts in us.

I think, though, sometimes we lose sight of the gifts God has given us, either through routine, or repetition, or misplaced energy and focus. We may utilize a gift we've been given, and in the beginning we find joy and fulfillment in offering that gift. But after time and repetition, the gift becomes work and tiresome, more of an obligation than a joyful offering to God. I've witnessed on numerous occasions where people in the church become burned out by this pattern. Not only has the individual lost the joyful desire to contribute their spiritual gift to the community, but the community fails to acknowledge the spiritual gift and its essential value to the church's life. How can we rediscover the joy in offering our spiritual gifts, and the respect which Paul speaks of that each gift is of equal value to the health of the church?

In our officer training session yesterday, one of the officers-elect shared an idea which I found helpful in this regard. Recently, she has decided to not do something as frequently as she had been, not because she doesn't enjoy it, but because it offers an opportunity for others to share in that ministry. In other words, by doing something less, she continues to joyfully give of her gift, and she offers more opportunity for others in the

community to discover their gift. I was humbled by her statement, for it reminded me of Paul's belief that all gifts are to be used for building up the Body of Christ, and what matters most is not our own personal ability to share our gift the best, but to make sure all gifts are shared to the best of their ability.

Sometimes, however, we can get so engrossed in the routines, busyness, and "work" of life that we are unable to discern clearly which gifts the Spirit has bestowed on us, and how we are called to share them. Sometimes, it helps to intentionally stop, reflect, pray, and hear anew God's call.

In my personal faith story, this has been crucial for my ability to hear God's voice in my life. By my sophomore year in college, I was lost. I was neck-deep in a challenging liberal arts education, but had no idea what I would do two years after graduation. The ministry had always been "there" for me, but I wasn't sure if that was truly what God had called me to do, or if it was what everyone expected me to do. I needed a way to retreat to a quiet place and seek God's voice.

That opportunity came by studying for a semester abroad in Scotland. It was during those six months away from my normal college schedule and atmosphere that I was renewed by life in a different culture, nourishing new friendships, and a chance to reflect on how my spiritual gifts were to be used in God's service. What that time gave me was a sense of purpose and clarity, and a renewed energy to finish my education with a direction toward seminary and service to the church.

As I look forward to a time of renewal in sabbatical this spring and summer, I am approaching it with a similar mindset as I did in college. I will look to this time as a chance hear anew God's claim on me, and how my spiritual gifts might be renewed and refreshed in service to the church. As I talk with other long-term pastors, I am excited and open to learning from them how they have stayed renewed and refreshed for service in their lives of ministry. And I expect and trust in God's Spirit that the result of this time will be the same as it was in college: that I will be energized to utilize the spiritual gifts God has bestowed on me to build up the Body of Christ.

But this time of renewal is not just for me; it also is for you as a congregation. And this is a chance for you, in an intentional way, to stop and examine what is important for you to hear again God's voice in your individual and corporate life. How can we keep Sabbath rest in a real, meaningful way, so that we don't get caught in the trap of our spiritual gifts becoming rote and routine? How can we rediscover what we love to do in the life of the church, and what can we experiment with and try anew, perhaps realizing that we are called to offer a new gift which we never knew we could offer? Some might be anxious about this upcoming time of renewal, feeling like things will "fall apart" while I'm gone. I believe and trust that the opposite will occur: it will be a time for existing and new spiritual gifts to blossom and be shared, and we as a congregation will be healthier and stronger as a result.

God is in all the gifts – no matter how large or how small. Discern the gifts God has blessed you with, and do not hesitate to share your gift in joy and gratitude for all God has done for you.

Thanks be to God! Amen.