



“Spiritual Gifts”

Scripture – Corinthians 12:1-11

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, January 17, 2016

Think for a moment about the way your family and close friends would describe you. What words would they use, not a physical description, but to explain the kind of person you are? Bright, caring, gregarious?

What about people who do not know you as well as family and close friends? How would your co-workers or acquaintances describe you? Stodgy, funny, efficient?

Now, here’s the tough one: think for a moment about the way God would describe you. This can be a bit unnerving. God knows you better than anyone else; even better than you know yourself. What traits and attributes does God see in you? Would God say, “Generosity, compassion and determination?” Would God say, “Well, at times, short-fused, arrogant, and demanding!”

These latter words might have been on the mind of the Apostle Paul when he was dictating this letter to the members of the church in Corinth. There was chaos in the Corinthian congregation and Paul was writing to squelch it. The Corinthians were arguing over whose spiritual gifts were superior. Basically, some were boasting to others, “What I bring to our church is more important than what you bring.” Paul writes them to ratchet down the decibel level, to smooth out the hostilities and to alter their perspective.

His message is straightforward. “There are varieties of spiritual gifts, but they all come from God. Some can provide wise counsel, others are given a good grasp on knowledge, some have the gift of healing, a few can prophecy.” He names several spiritual gifts and says regardless of which one you possess, such gifts are to be used for the common good. Spiritual gifts are not to create divisions among people. There is no hierarchy of gifts, so there is no reason to boast or to belittle.

A hand-painted sign that was spotted outside a children’s clubhouse, would have been the perfect sign for Paul to post on the door of the Corinthian Church. The sign read: “Nobody act big. Nobody act small. Everybody act in-between.”

Paul is saying to the members of the Corinthian church, “If you feel that what you bring is more important than what others bring, take a little air out of your ego. On the other hand, if you are doing all you can, but you feel your contribution is insignificant, then, please know in your heart that what you do counts.”

For the church to be at its best, everyone cannot possess the same spiritual gift. It is the variety of gifts that gives the church its energy. With numerous gifts, the church makes a greater impact on the world. If Paul were writing

to 21st Century North Americans, especially right now during the NFL playoffs, he might say, “Football teams need people with different athletic gifts. They need muscular blockers and tacklers, accurate passers and swift receivers, punters and kickers, all working together for the good of the team.

Or, he might say, “An orchestra must have people with different musical gifts. To produce a rich sound they need violinists and pianists, cellists and flutists, trumpeters and percussionists.” People with multiple gifts, working together are able to accomplish something great. That is what Paul was trying to encourage among the Corinthians.

However, today’s passage leaves many wondering, “What exactly qualifies as a spiritual gift? I heard Paul’s list and I’m not sure any apply to me.”

Paul says, “To one is given the utterance of wisdom.” Not so sure. Let’s see, do I have the gift of healing? No. Working miracles? Definitely not. Ability to prophecy? Hardly. Speaking in tongues? No way. The gift of interpreting ecstatic speech? Not a chance. I’m a Presbyterian for goodness sakes!

If this is the complete list of spiritual gifts, only a handful of people can claim to have them. However, Paul’s list is not exhaustive. We know this to be the case because Paul also talked about spiritual gifts when he wrote to the church in Rome and when he wrote to the church in Ephesus, and the gifts he names in the three different congregations are not identical.

If we focus on what Paul writes, we find that these gifts are difficult to define. Sometimes Paul speaks of spiritual gifts as an **ability** to do something such as teach; at other times he speaks of spiritual gifts as an **attribute** such as wisdom; still later he speaks of spiritual gifts as **positions within the church**, such as evangelist.

If that were not enough to make the term slippery, Paul speaks not only of *gifts* of the Spirit, but also *fruit* of the Spirit. Historically, the church has divided the gifts of the Spirit from the fruit of the Spirit, and the two lists appear tidy until you compare them with what Paul actually wrote. Case in point, he speaks of love and generosity as both a *gift* of the spirit and a *fruit* of the spirit. All of which leads me to believe that we must take an expansive view of what constitutes a spiritual gift. Think of spiritual gifts as special abilities and attributes and passions that God wants us to use to enhance the Body of Christ and to spread God’s realm in the world.

In today’s passage, Paul names: wisdom, faith, healing, prophecy, tongues and the ability to interpret tongues. When Paul writes to the Christians living in Rome, he names as spiritual gifts: generosity, leadership, compassion, and hospitality. When he writes to the Ephesians, he takes an entirely different approach. Instead of talking about personal attributes, he talks in terms of positions within the church. He says, “The gifts God gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.”

It seems clear that Paul never intended to name every spiritual gift or to imply that anyone could create a list that was complete. Spiritual gifts are abilities, attributes and passions that we utilize to move the world toward God’s dream for the world. The list of spiritual gifts is long and includes such biblical directives as a passion for justice, and the ability to be a peacemaker.

Have you ever thought of yourself as possessing certain spiritual gifts? You do! It might sound pious, but everyone here has spiritual gifts. Some are evident in people who teach, people who sing in the choir, people who serve as Stephen ministers, those who provide a hospitable welcome, people who give generously, and people who serve in one of our many mission activities that boost the lives of people who are hurting. In an age in which most people want to talk, being a good listener is a spiritual gift. So is having the patience to help a child learn to read or having a knack for lifting the spirits of people who are discouraged.

What gifts have you been given that can help someone who is lonely or grieving a loss? What gifts do you possess that can help to reconcile a broken relationship? Everyone who follows Jesus needs to have some degree of awareness of his/her spiritual gifts. And from time to time we need to ask ourselves how we are using our gifts.

One word of warning: When you focus on your spiritual gifts, you may find yourself wishing you had other gifts; gifts that seem more impressive. You may find yourself thinking, “If only I had such-and-such gift, I could really make a difference.”

Rabbi Zussye said, “I am about to face the Holy One, and justify my sojourn on earth. If God will ask me: Zussye, why were you not like Moses? I shall respond, because you did not grant me the gifts you granted Moses. If God will ask me: Zussye, why were you not like Rabbi Akiba? I shall respond, because you did not grant me the gifts you granted Rabbi Akiba. But God will not ask me why I was not like Moses or why I was not like Rabbi Akiba. God will ask: Zussye, why were you not like Zussye? Why did you not fulfill the potential which was Zussye? And it is for this question that I tremble.”¹

God has blessed each of us with spiritual gifts to be used for the common good. The question is not why we have the gifts, but rather how well we use the gifts.

A pastor shared the story of a man in his congregation who was a recognized leader. He was an example of all things good, decent and helpful. His faith was a model for others within the congregation. His courageous commitments encouraged others to become more committed. But, by his own admission, he had not always been that way. He told his pastor that as a young man, in his own words, ‘I was always looking for trouble. And if the trouble were really bad, I’d look for it twice! But then, I met Elizabeth a kind, moral young woman who loved me no matter how big a scoundrel I was. And little by little, because I wanted to live up to her love, I became less and less a scoundrel. Finally we married, and I have spent my whole life trying to make her as happy as she made me.’ Then he said, ‘The truth is, Elizabeth loved me into loving.’”

When we use our spiritual gifts as Elizabeth did, God can use us to transform people’s lives – and to change our world.

NOTES

1. Victoria G. Curtiss, “More Than Just Tagging Along,” January 23, 2011.
2. Michael Brown, “Does Baptism Matter?” day1.org, January 13, 2013.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

For the life that you have given, Almighty God, we give thanks. You formed us from the dust of the earth and filled us with your breath ... and then you called us into your creative work. To some you have given gifts of curiosity or wonder, vision or imagination. To others you have given the ability to understand the intricacies of your world, or to discover new possibilities. To some, the skill to build or to plant, or to fix what is broken; to others talents for calling out creativity in others, or for supporting those in need. We give thanks for these gifts of the Spirit, and offer them in Christ’s service. Help us to use them for your glory.

Creator God, our world looks so different from that garden of long ago, when you first breathed into us the breath of life. We gaze on your creation and see spoiled seas and smog-filled skies. We see communities plagued by injustice and bodies plagued by disease. We see hearts that are broken and spirits that are downcast, and we long for glimpses of your new creation. Breathe your healing Spirit upon us, and fill your world with the peace that you alone can bring. But fill us also with hope for a world made new, and courage to join in your creative work.

Stir us to use gifts of encouragement and service, prayer and discernment. Help the leaders inspire, and the healers restore; help the teachers nurture wisdom, and the poets speak prophetic words. Empower all of us to use the gifts you have given for the common good, so that all people may know life abundant.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who calls us to lives of service, and who has given us words to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be they name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.