

“Life in the Spirit: Gifted”

July 13, 2014

Gifted. That word can take us to places where we put one another in order - where one of us is more important than another or our abilities matter more than others.

Last week we talked about God’s grace that brings us together and the way that we experience grace in the sacraments – in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. There was a call to unity in Christ as we focused on being one Body, gifted by one Spirit, with one hope, serving one Lord, having one faith, one baptism, and one God. And we remember that line: The Spirit changes everything!

Today we focus more on spiritual gifts. I want to share a description of what spiritual gifts are from a study called “Serving from the Heart.” Spiritual gifts are divine abilities that are not learned. They are given to every Christian through the grace of God. So, spiritual gifts are not learned, and they are not earned. They are given by the Holy Spirit. They are not something we choose, but gifts that are given to us. They are one way that God’s grace is at work in us and through us.

They are used to serve and strengthen one another - to build each other up. They are used to glorify God. They are for God’s purposes, and when they are used, God gets the glory. Spiritual gifts are the way by which we carry out the Great Commission - to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Now there’s always debate surrounding them. Are we born with them? Do they come to us when we accept Christ? I’m not sure I can answer that question today, but I can guarantee that spiritual gifts are biblical. The point is that we discover who we are because each of us is gifted - and gifted uniquely - to serve others and glorify God.

We’re drawn to use our spiritual gifts, and many of us already do. Many times, other people recognize the gifts in us. Most of the time, we’re comfortable serving with them. And when we use our spiritual gifts, we’re effective in ministry - meaning that God gets the glory. Many of you are doing things in faith you never thought of doing, and the Kingdom of God is built up because of it.

I invite you to look at the gift tag that you received this morning. On one side you see the verse from First Corinthians. On the other side, you see a list of gifts. Look at the list of the gifts. This is one version of the 20 gifts named in Scripture. But I also want you to know that I don’t think Paul’s intent is to make an exhaustive list. It’s not that the 20 gifts are listed, you find which ones are yours, and then you’re done. As you continue through these weeks, each Scripture highlights something about spiritual gifts and about how we use those gifts and view the gifts.

No one has ownership of the gifts, and no one has all of them. But what is amazing is that all of these gifts are present within the Body of Christ. Gifts shouldn’t tear us apart, but rather, spiritual gifts hold us together and remind us of God’s grace in all of us.

I’m confident that each one of these gifts is present within the congregation at Lake Harbor, but we have to identify them. I can’t figure out anyone else’s, and each of us has the opportunity to do it. There are links to an online survey in the bulletin, and we have paper copies. There are no excuses not to try!

Paul’s comments about spiritual gifts come as a response. He’s writing to a community of Christians. And it may not surprise you to know that the church in Corinth was in conflict. As a new

community, there was tension around many issues - one being how they would come together even with different gifts.

Paul says that he doesn't want them to be uninformed. Many scholars believe that some in the church in Corinth were holding their gifts as more important than others. Perhaps there were some who thought that ecstatic speech was the best gift, and if you didn't have it, then you didn't matter so much. Those gifts that were more public were given greater importance. There was a superiority complex at work here, and it wasn't serving the church well. It was hurting the church.

So you notice that Paul reminds them that Jesus brings them together. All who claim that Jesus is Lord are united by the Spirit. And it's the Holy Spirit that distributes different gifts among the people. They might serve in different ways, but they are all serving the same Lord Jesus. God works in all of them in different ways, but again, it's one God working among them and through them.

Still we have moments when we think that our gifts are the best and most needed and most important and maybe that we're the only ones who can do it the way it needs to be done. I'll admit to you that I've struggled with that - and sometimes I still do. So that's real.

But the truth is that each of us who claims to follow Jesus Christ is gifted with spiritual gifts. That's what we need to hear and remember today. Yes, I'm talking to you - even you who's sitting there and thinking, "What is she talking about? I don't have anything to share. I don't have any gifts to use in the church. She doesn't know me. She doesn't know what I can do and can't do."

And you're right. I don't know everything. And I know that one survey about spiritual gifts is not the end of it, but it can be a beginning. It can be a time to discover God's call and purpose more fully and participate in God's Kingdom in a new way. Maybe you're already using your gift. Praise God! I already see many people using God's gifts to plan worship, serve those in need, care for others, lead others in faith. I love this idea of "God touches," and my guess is that we probably don't record them as often as we should. I can name many of us who have already touched my life with God's love in a few short weeks!

Yesterday, it was wonderful to see the youth group and chaperones come together in prayer for the mission trip. There were three young women leading the devotional time and using their spiritual gifts. One of them read Scripture. Another talked about the theme for the week. And another offered a heartfelt prayer of blessing. So spiritual gifts are being used all the time! But what would it look like if all of us were doing that more readily, more consistently, more faithfully? What would it be like to connect the gifts and passions to the needs around us?

I'm not sure that we have a superiority complex about spiritual gifts as much as we struggle with apathy in the church. Many of us don't know what our gifts are. But we need to know for the sake of our mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ. If we want to welcome all, then we need to know who has the gift of hospitality and mercy and evangelism. If we want to live empowered by Christ, then we need to claim the gifts we have. If we want to serve effectively in the world, then we need to know how and where we should be serving - and maybe even be able to know the gifts we don't have.

Without the knowledge of our gifts, we've allowed ourselves to be "off the hook" for using the gifts. We simply go along and figure that it doesn't matter. We need to hear that powerful Good News that each of us is gifted by God with spiritual gifts for the common good - to make a difference for the

sake of Jesus Christ in the world. I read this recently: "To be the church is to hold onto one another, to be a team, to value each other's gifts, and to work together to carry out the mission Christ has entrusted to us."

We can have great people who share their gifts in worship, but if we don't have people who are gifted in hospitality, then we struggle to carry out our mission. We can have people excited about being together to learn, but if we don't have people with the gift of teaching, then it will be difficult to carry out our mission. We can have people using the gift of leadership, but if we don't have people with the gift of discernment, then we can't carry out our mission. We can have people who offer great ideas about how to serve, but if there aren't people who have the gift of serving and helping, then we can't fulfill our mission.

Writer Emile Zola said, "The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work." We can have the gifts, but if they're not opened and used, then we're sunk. Think about one person who used their spiritual gifts and changed your life. Maybe it was a pastor who was a great shepherd or a teacher and encourager or a person with wisdom or someone who had the spiritual gift of giving. Each of us has benefitted from someone's spiritual gifts. And we're called to open and use ours.

We're supposed to use the gifts to build up the church, so we need to use them within the church community, and also outside of these walls. Anything that we can do to build up the Body of Christ, any way that we can share the Good News of God's love for all people, any small or big thing that we can do to tell what Jesus offers for all people – then we're using the gifts. Every gift of the Spirit – and every person with the gifts – is valuable.

You are called by God to be in relationship with God. You are gifted with gifts. You are valued. Your gifts are important to the whole. Some of us know what they are, and you use them willingly and powerfully. Some of us still don't know. How might life be different if you did? How might you find joy in serving if you knew your gifts and used them to bring glory and praise to God?

Walter Brueggeman has a great line: "When the Church is empowered by the Spirit, the world finds it irresistible." I think he's right! When we use the gifts of God, people are drawn to God. It's not that we get the glory, but our lives point to the source of our giftedness and the source of grace - our God who is faithful and who is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

Thanks be to God. AMEN!