

“Life in the Spirit: Your Gifts Matter”

July 20, 2014

3rd Sunday at Lake Harbor UMC – Spiritual Gifts Series

It’s a very human thing. Probably most of us have had those moments when we’ve struggled because we felt that our lives had no meaning or purpose or goal.

Maybe you experienced it as a young adult, or maybe in middle age, or maybe in older age. I remember a great illustration from one of my all-time favorite shows “E.R.” One of the surgeons was lamenting her 31st birthday and how she had nothing to show for it. Her mentor listened, then took her and showed her how her gifts had made a difference. This young surgeon had performed two surgeries that day that had saved two lives, and this mentor reminded her that her gifts had power and that she shouldn’t compare herself to anyone else. She used her gifts and transformed people’s lives.

Sometime we find ourselves in that place in our faith life. We look at everything else except how God is working by the power of the Holy Spirit. Rather than claiming the gifts that God has given us, we compare ourselves to others in the church, in our jobs, in our friendships, in our families. We don’t realize how we’ve affected someone else’s life in a powerful way. We don’t see how being faithful to Christ makes others think about their own faith. We forget that the Holy Spirit is using us to share the love of Jesus Christ with others. We know people who are hungry to understand God’s love for them in a deeper way. All of us ask those profound questions: who am I? Why am I here? What’s my purpose? How can I serve God more fully and more faithfully? All of us want to know that our lives matter - that our gifts matter.

As we’re on this journey of discovering or maybe re-discovering our spiritual gifts, it’s important to know why. We will know ourselves better. We will understand our passions more fully and be able to explore how what we’re passionate about can meet the needs around us. We may be able to prioritize our time and energy because we’ll have more clarity about saying “yes” with joy and being able to say “no” to those areas where we simply aren’t gifted. In all of it, we’re seeking God’s will for our lives.

As we began with Ephesians and have focused on Corinthians, we hear that sense of unity that we have in Jesus Christ. We don’t start with ourselves, but with God and God’s love for us. We are gifted by the Holy Spirit with gifts that we don’t learn or earn - they are gifts. I hope that you have your gift tag somewhere that you can see it daily. Even though that list of 20 isn’t exhaustive, it’s a way for us to remember that God has gifted each of us with spiritual gifts to be used for the common good - for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Remember that there was dissension in Corinth, and Paul was concerned about it. He heard rumors about people arguing over status. He addressed specific issues about morality and conduct. And people were comparing God’s gifts and competing with one another – overlooking how these gifts were to serve a greater purpose – building up the whole body.

So after addressing what’s wrong in Corinth, Paul goes onto to talk about what’s right. God’s gifts are already present and available, but we have to use them! So we’re confronted with that truth - that we are gifted. And Paul continues with one of the

most powerful and relatable images in Scripture - the body - to explain how and why we are different from one another, yet connected and supportive of each other as we share the message of Jesus Christ.

I'm fascinated by human biology and anatomy. It's a miracle how we grow from microscopic organisms into full-size human beings. I had the pleasure of holding baby Tatum Dean this week - just one day after she was born. It's mysterious how our organs, bones, and tissues all fit together to form a body that does so many different things. We're wonderfully made, and Paul challenges us to see how we function together for God's sake.

Frederick Buechner says, "God was making a body for Christ, Paul said. Christ didn't have a regular body any more so God was making him one out of anybody he could find who looked as if he might just possibly do. He was using other people's hands to be Christ's hands and other people's feet to be Christ's feet, and when there was some place where Christ was needed in a hurry and needed bad, he put the finger on some maybe-not-all-that-innocent bystander and got him to go and be Christ in that place himself for lack of anybody better."

Just like each of our body parts, each of us has a purpose and use in the Body of Christ. Transformation – growth and development – happen when these gifts are used. You can tell the difference, can't you? When the Holy Spirit is in control in a church, there's energy – like electricity that never goes off. When we know our gifts and use them, there is joy and excitement about what God is up to. People respond to God's grace in service that allows God's gifts to be used for the building up of God's Kingdom, and that attracts others to discover their own gifts.

God transforms us, too. Paul's list isn't complete – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues and interpretation of tongues. He adds roles of people, too – apostles, prophets, teachers. But he never says that's all. Consider other gifts that we might include – service offered to the church for the common good. If we thought about it, how many different ways to serve could we name? It could take all day!

And Paul reminds us that there's a need for balance in using our gifts and celebrating the gifts of others. We should serve God with joy because of God's gifts to us. Unity in Christ and diversity of spiritual gifts is God's design. We should not expect uniformity – that all of us will look the same, act the same, or believe the same on certain issues. The church is not a social club where we gather with people are just like us. We're not cookie-cutter cutouts, but we do share a common story of God's grace in Jesus Christ! We strive for unity in Christ.

Coming into a new church, it's easy to see (again!) that the church is interdependent. Pastors don't do everything. Office staff doesn't do everything. Committee chairs don't do it all. Each of us in the church can't do everything, and we're not gifted to do everything. I need you. You need me. We depend on each other to use the gifts we have. I function as a part of the Body just like you, and God calls us to depend on one another – not to ignore our own gifts, but to recognize and call out gifts in others.

There's a story of Nicolo Paganini, a famous violinist who willed his violin to Genoa, Italy – the city where he was born. It was a wonderful gesture, except for one condition. He didn't want the violin to be played ever again. This was unfortunate because the wood, as long as it was used and handled, would show little wear. But without regular handling and playing, it begins to decay. Now the violin sits in a beautiful case decayed – only valued as a relic.

This image is important for us as we live our faith and how God means for us to find our purpose in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit gives these gifts to build up the Kingdom of God. But what good do they do if we don't use them? We have to be willing to use the gifts and realize that God arranges them as God sees fit. None of us can do it all alone, but neither can we expect that someone else will do it! God gives these gifts that they might be used well and willingly. God gives these gifts that they might be used to bring God glory and bring others to new life in Jesus Christ. If we don't use our gifts, the world will not be transformed to be more like the Kingdom of God. And you see a powerful illustration with the puzzle. Something is missing when even one person doesn't offer their gifts to the whole.

Friends, Paul doesn't say, "You're sort of like the Body of Christ" or "Be more like the Body of Christ." He reminds us of what is crucial to our faith. He's bold, and his message is loud and clear: "Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it." I pray that we hear God's voice, encouraging us and empowering us to be more together than we could ever be alone. We are the Body of Christ. We are gifted with gifts, and your gifts matter.

Brothers and sisters, we are the Body of Christ – may it truly be so! Thanks be to God. AMEN.