

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, September 25, 2022
10am

Text: Romans 12:1-8 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

When I was a college student, every spring I looked forward to our conference's annual young adult retreat – YAR, for short. Forty or so young adults would pilgrimage to Lazy F Camp and Retreat Center, situated in the pine forests along the Manastash Ridge in Ellensburg. The purpose of the retreat was to connect young adult United Methodists in friendship and fellowship, with an eye to our spiritual formation.

One year we gathered in the lodge's common room to take a spiritual gifts assessment. Who here has taken a spiritual gifts assessment before? [ask for a show of hands] A spiritual gifts assessment is a tool designed to help you identify the unique gifts the Holy Spirit has given you to build the kingdom of God. Paul outlines some of those gifts in today's Scripture lesson: prophesying, teaching, giving, leading. He adds to this list in other letters, most notably 1 Corinthians 12. Paul's list is by no means exhaustive; as the Church has grown in maturity and wisdom, so has its understanding of the manifest gifts of its members.

The list of gifts on the assessment I took was quite extensive. We spread out around the room, sprawled across couches and the floor, pencil and paper in hand as a pastor led us through a series of questions. When we were finished, we tallied up our results. A high score in a particular category meant that was a spiritual gift to pay attention to and cultivate.

The spiritual gift I had my eye on was 'pastoring' or 'shepherding.' At the time, I was in the very early stages of wrestling with a call to ordained ministry. I was active in my university's Methodist student ministry and ecumenical Christian activities on campus. I had even flown to Dallas the previous year for a conference dedicated to helping young adults discern whether they were called to professional ministry.

Honestly, I was not in love with the idea of being a pastor. I wanted to go to law school and serve in the U.S. Navy. But I also wanted to be obedient to God. I thought that if this spiritual gift assessment told me I had the gift of pastoring, then that was confirmation I was called. The gifts assessment was my challenge to God: “Ok Lord, I’m putting out the fleece. Show me your will for my life.”

After a half hour or so, the results were in: Pastoring was not my spiritual gift. I had scored reasonably high in that category, but I had scored even higher in others, namely administration. With a mixture of relief and disappointment, I set the results aside, and with them my call to ministry.

Obviously, that was not the end of the story, otherwise I would not be standing here before you today. The Holy Spirit is not that easily deterred. But I think my experience taking that assessment says something critical about the way we often think about our gifts, skills, and passions. We tend to approach them from a utilitarian standpoint: How do my gifts serve *me* and *my interests*? I wanted my gifts to confirm my expectations for my life, not God’s expectations. And even with a little more experience and maturity, I still catch myself having this regular conversation with God: “Lord, you gave me the gift of administration and boy do I have a great plan for how to use that gift!” But as one of our sisters in Christ wisely remarked this week, spiritual gifts are not the same as presents. The gifts that God gives us are for the service of God’s kingdom, and sometimes that will be at odds with what we want in life. Just ask any of the biblical prophets how they felt about their gift of prophecy.

We also tend to rank spiritual gifts in terms of value to the Church. As stated, one of my spiritual gifts is administration. That does not sound like a very ‘spiritual’ gift; instead, that sounds like a gift suited to banking or government. Christians covet spiritual gifts like prophecy, intercession, teaching, and healing – the gifts we see Jesus and the apostles using in the Bible. These are gifts that have an obvious connection to ministry. But the word ‘spiritual’ does not describe the gift. ‘Spiritual’ describes Who the gift comes from and Who the gift serves. And that Who, with a capital ‘W,’ is God.

Every person is a gift with gifts. Last week we acknowledged that we are all made in God’s image. Each of us is a gift from God redeemed by God’s grace. This week we affirm that the image of God we bear, the divine light inside each of us, is

refracted through a unique set of gifts, skills, and passions. God has endowed each of us with unique gifts to build His kingdom. As we use our gifts to minister to the world, we reveal glimpses of God’s character, and the world experiences God through us. This is why it is wise to understand our gifts and evaluate whether and how we are using them. Our gifts are our greatest tool for sharing Jesus with our neighbors.

In our Scripture lesson, Paul writes, “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (v. 1). God’s grace lays claim to not just parts of us, but all of us! This includes our gifts. They are given by God and redeemed by God for God’s purpose. And that purpose is to build up the body of Christ and the kingdom of God on earth. We worship God not just here in this sanctuary on Sunday mornings, but every day of our lives by offering God our whole selves in service. This is our spiritual worship, our living sacrifice, our good and right response to the grace that God has shown us.

The Greek word that Paul uses for ‘gift’ is *charismata*. This word is related to the English word ‘charisma.’ When we describe someone as having charisma, we are describing a special kind of presence or charm that attracts people and inspires devotion. The root of this word is the Greek *charis*, which means grace. Our gifts – *charismata* – are the product of God’s grace – *charis*. Like a person who has charisma, our gifts are designed to attract others. But they should not attract others to ourselves. Instead, our gifts should attract people to God, so that they, too, can experience the same grace and redemption that we have experienced.

As Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (v. 2). The world teaches that our gifts, skills, and passions exist to please ourselves. We use them in the pursuit of self-satisfaction, self-actualization – chasing after wealth, prestige, happiness. But God’s grace renews our minds so that we see that our gifts exist for something and Someone greater than ourselves. God’s grace teaches us to discern the will of God for our lives through the living offering of our gifts.

Perhaps the greatest problem with the spiritual gifts assessment I took in college is that I took it in isolation. Sure, there were other people in the room answering the same set of questions. But I interpreted the results in the context of my

personal life, not the context of the body of Christ. Our gifts do not belong solely to us; the community has a claim on them, as well. Our gifts must be discerned in community because they belong to the community – God has given them to us to serve one another, encourage one another, and build each other up.

I thought I could escape my calling to ordained ministry because ‘pastoring’ did not rank at the top of my spiritual gifts. But that particular gift is not the sum total of what makes a pastor. God knew that and used the church to teach me differently. God did the calling, but it was the body of Christ that confirmed my gifts and graces for professional ministry. It was the people, people like you – in churches, hospitals, and nursing home chapels, from Washington, to Oregon, to North Carolina – that affirmed and encouraged and grew those gifts until I was prepared to claim God’s calling for myself.

“For as in one body we have many members and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace [*charis*] given to us” (vv. 4-6).

The Church is strengthened when we not only see the image of God in every member of the body, but value that image by encouraging and cultivating the gifts of every member. The Church is weakened when we minimize, dismiss, or reject the gifts of others. Paul calls that arrogance, pure and simple. Because we are one in Christ, to reject one member is to reject a piece of ourselves. It is to dismember the body.

I feel the greatest pleasure as your pastor when I can affirm your gifts and connect those gifts with a need in the church or the wider community. This is the pastor’s job: To equip her people for ministry! So, what are your gifts? Do you know? If not, I encourage you to take The EveryGift Inventory that accompanies this worship series. The link to the inventory is in this week’s newsletter and on the website. Share the results with someone so they can affirm and encourage what you are learning about yourself. And if you are already familiar with your gifts, still take the inventory so your gifts can be included and celebrated in our church report. I want to know each of your gifts and support you in sharing them with the world. No gift is too small or insignificant. Every gift reflects the beauty of our God who created you and loves you.

As you go about your lives this week, may God deepen the awareness of the gifts that He has given you, and the gifts of those around you. May you look at yourself and your neighbor through the eyes of *charis* – the eyes of grace. And may you give thanks.

Amen.