

January 20, 2019
Ellen Fowler Skidmore
Forest Lake Presbyterian

Now Concerning Spiritual Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

The Apostle Paul begins today's scripture with words -even today – that catch our attention. "Now, concerning Spiritual Gifts . . ." he says. And we want to know if our names are on the list of those who have spiritual gifts. We hear Paul say that every Christian is given spiritual gifts, but we also know that that is not how things seem to work around here.

The Church needs wise, strategic, courageous people to lead, and so we tend to value certain abilities, skills and gifts more than others. So, for example, churches are not immune to the temptation to make those who give large gifts of money leaders in the church, apart from any other skill they may have. And, if someone in the congregation serves in a powerful position in the week-day world, then they are often the first people the congregation thinks of to lead as an Elder or Deacon. A successful project manager, well-known elected official, or a well-respected CEO on the Session is an easy call and can help a congregation make progress.

The Church can be as fascinated with power, status and progress as any other human institution.

I have been in many Presbyterian churches where there is a room set aside for the monthly meetings of the Elders of a congregation. That room is often called "The Session Room." In almost every case, The Session Room is beautiful, often with a long dark wood table and comfortable upholstered chairs, much like the board rooms in successful businesses and firms around town. There is a certain satisfaction that comes from pulling up to that that long beautiful table in a comfortable chair and sitting with the people who have the power to make decisions. We all like to be among the "in" crowd, to be among those who make decisions. And in many congregations, there are many signs that the congregation has established a hierarchy of holiness. It is a very human thing to do.

The Apostle Paul gives us another way to think of the community of Jesus.

Now concerning spiritual gifts he says. And, from the get go, we are hooked. We want to be spiritual. We want to know what gift God has given us and we want to be recognized for our gifts. Over the years I have collected and read through all sorts of "Spiritual Gifts Inventories" – or tests – designed to help people figure out what their Spiritual gifts are. And at the end of each "test", I always feel frustrated. First, there is the argument over what is the difference between a skill (considered not holy) and a spiritual gift (that which marks us as holier than others). And then there is the discussion about whether or not we like the results of the test and agree that the gift it identifies is what we actually have – or want to have. The Spiritual Gifts Inventories I have collected over the years feel more like spiritual personality

tests – it is easy for them to become an ego-centric, self-congratulatory exercise. Spiritual navel-gazing with no observable outcomes.

Paul here says several things that the community of Jesus needs to hear in a world that recognizes and rewards those who wield power and authority effectively. Paul speaks to all of us who want to know what Spiritual Gifts we have so that we will feel holy, valued and affirmed.

First, Paul says that God gives EVERY follower of Jesus gifts, abilities or skills. So, there are not 2 categories of Christians- those who have no gifts and those who have lots of gifts. EVERY disciple of Jesus has abilities, skills and gifts that God has given to us. But, our gifts are just that – GIFTS – NOT Dividends. We did not earn, nor do we deserve or own the skills, gifts and abilities that God has entrusted to us for our use. Every gift, skill or ability we have both came from and belong to God. Our gifts are not the basis for our value or our self-importance, they are a sign of the generosity of God. And, our abilities, skills and gifts are ours to use for serving God and the world. We are chosen and redeemed for a purpose, says Paul, and that purpose is SERVICE, NOT PRIVILEGE.

And all of the gifts, abilities and skills we have are given to us to serve a specific purpose – or better yet – a particular person: Jesus. For Christians, spiritual gifts are not nebulous or mystical or ego-centric. Christian Spirituality is tied to some very concrete things.¹ Spiritual Gifts are given for the good of the Church, to enable us to serve Jesus Christ, and to help others serve Jesus Christ. So, the mark of a spiritual gift is that the gift is used to glorify God, NOT THE USER OF THE GIFT.

Paul demystifies our understanding of Spiritual Gifts, by reminding us that Spiritual Gifts are given to EVERY child of God to help us serve Jesus as Lord, or the gifts are being wasted. “No one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. This is not about whether or not people can say something that they might or might not believe. This is about the recognition that our purpose, our being and our gifts – when they work in cooperation with God’s purpose and Spirit – always serve Jesus Christ as Lord.

So, it is important to say, on the day when we are ordaining and installing new Deacons and Elders in this congregation that God gives spiritual gifts for leadership and pastoral care, not to establish a spiritual hierarchy or to feed our own egos or to establish who the really holy and powerful people are in our congregation. God gives the spiritual gifts of leadership and pastoral care so that God’s people will be cared for and the church will make wise and faithful decisions. Ordaining and Installing new deacons and elders is about continuing to use the gifts, skills and abilities that God has given to these individuals to move us further along the journey of following Jesus. And, I have come to believe that rooms designated “The Session Room” and other distinctions of power and privilege are distractions and impediments to what God calls us to do. The time has come for the Church of Jesus Christ to be single minded about serving God’s purpose, and to act like the Church, not the corporate or business world.

All fall, these new Deacons and Elders and I have been meeting during Sunday School to read, study and discuss what it means to lead in our Congregation. We call that class, Officer Training. We read through large parts of our denomination's Constitution – our Book of Order and our Book of Confessions. We talk about how budgets are made and kept and how we organize ourselves to provide pastoral care. We also talk about things like healthy conflict versus unhealthy conflict, and we discuss communication ground rules. And in the course of the fall, one of our new leaders asked, "What does it actually mean to be ordained?"

THAT is a very important question. I want to tell you clearly what I believe. Ordination is the act of the whole church to set aside some people for particular functions or jobs that the whole Church needs to work well and efficiently. Ordination is to a function – to a job – to a responsibility – to a service – that benefits the community of Jesus. Ordination does not mean that the person is more holy than others, more powerful than others or somehow spiritually higher than the rest of the community members. Ordination – for me, for the Deacons, for the Elders – either serves the purposes of Christ and the good of the community of Christ, or it is misguided, misleading and only Christian in its covering but self-serving at its heart.

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

If and when, in our individual seeking to grow as Disciples of Jesus Christ, we find ourselves trying to grasp power or demanding affirmation from others, then that should be a signal that we are off track. Serving Jesus Christ is not about having our ego needs be met. Serving Jesus Christ is not about being recognized as more valuable than other Christians. Serving Jesus Christ is about being in the service of the Kingdom of God here on earth. And being ordained – as a minister, as an Elder or as a Deacon – is a sign of a commitment to serve -not our own needs, but the needs of others and the needs of the community of Christ – which we call The Church.

Now concerning Spiritual Gifts there is no magic test or discernment needed. What does the Church and the world need that you and I have? That gift, that skill, that ability, that thing has been given to us to help us accomplish what God has in mind. And what God has in mind for you, me and the world is most clearly seen in the ministry of Jesus Christ. We are to be as Christ was in the world – withholding nothing that we have from a hurting, seeking, lost and beloved world. Now, concerning Spiritual Gifts may it be so – just as Paul says – at Forest Lake Presbyterian Church.

Prayer by Dr. MLK, Jr. on Acceptance:

Lord help me to accept my tools. However dull they are, help me to accept them. And then Lord, after I have accepted my tools, then help me to set out and do what I can do with my tools.

ⁱ Feasting On The Word; Year C; Vol. 1; p.255. Thanks to Raewynne J. Whiteley for this insight.