

‘Gifts’
Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper
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based on Romans 12:1-8

Gifts. Who doesn’t like getting gifts?

The very word implies something special. Unless you were playing a prank on someone you wouldn’t intentionally give a bad gift. Gifts are ... special.

The primary reason we give gifts is because we want to please or honor another person. We don’t give a gift and hope the person hates it. (again, pranks aside)

When we receive gifts it’s a little different. Hopefully we like whatever is inside the gift-wrapped box. If we don’t most of us still at least pretend we like it.

Gift-giving and receiving can get complicated, but in the act of giving and receiving is embedded an offering of affection.

But items wrapped up in a box and ceremoniously given to another person isn’t the kind of “gifts” we’re talking about today.

When we join a United Methodist Church and we’re asked if we will faithfully participate in the life of the church through our: prayers, presence, GIFTS, service and witness.

The kind of gifts highlighted in our membership vows are gifts we already possess inside us. They are gifts that contribute to the vitality of Christ’s church. Sometimes they are called ‘spiritual gifts.’

We read several places in scripture describing how every person is gifted with certain ... spiritual abilities. The Apostle Paul helps us understand how these gifts are given to us by God, but are activated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

... and it is through our baptism we are infused with the power of the Holy Spirit to ignite our gifts with passion and fire for the Good News of Jesus.

From our scripture reading today we see there is an important aspect to gifts: in the giving and receiving cycle we first receive our spiritual gift from God, then give the gift back to God in our service and witness to our faith.

As this cycle goes round and round we are surrounded by and energized by God’s grace and the image of Christ appears.

When the Apostle Paul writes how we are to offer ourselves as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” we are giving to God our greatest gift: the very best imitation of Christ we can possibly present.

Therefore, we do not conform to the world, but transform the world by being living imitators of Christ. That is the very best gift God will treasure forever and ever.

You will never consign that gift to a rummage sale table or re-gifted it to someone else. If anything people will come to you and say, “Wow! Where did you get that outfit you’re wearing? You look amazing!”

You can say with all sincerity, “Thank you! I got it at church.”

You see, when we live a life worthy of our calling ... people can’t help but notice.

When we fully participate in the life of Christ’s church with our God-given gifts we are sharing together within a community that brings other people to know and love the same

kind of loving we experience.

A solitary Christian is a sad thing. Actually, I'm not sure there is such a thing as a solitary Christian.

John Wesley once asked a fellow scholar advice about the Christian faith. Wesley was told, "Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve God alone. You must therefore find companions or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion."

By virtue of our membership vows we become part of a community that makes companions on the journey in the sharing of our gifts.

So, how do you know what your spiritual gifts are?

Well, for one thing ... you can't walk up to a store shelf and buy what suits your fancy. God-given gifts are already inside you. Your spiritual gifts are already at work.

Here's what I mean:

Years ago I spent six weeks in a class together with others seeking to identify our own spiritual gifts. We studied what having spiritual gifts meant. We supported one another as we discerned our gifts. We prayed with one another ... and when we took the Spiritual Gifts inventory (questionnaire) we celebrated with one another as we named and claimed our gifts.

I still have the inventory results: (see if you agree with the results)

1. Encouragement
2. Assisting
3. Compassion

I've taken the inventory several times since then and those three always rate high; but I have also scored high in leadership and prophecy.

There are up to 18 spiritual gifts identified in the Bible.

What strikes me most about Paul's letter to the Romans is his line: "individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us..."

This line follows the admonition to be humble. Don't think more of yourself than you ought ... don't claim spiritual gifts that aren't yours. Help one another to name and claim their gifts. Most of all, don't think your gifts are greater than another.

This is when co-dependency can be a good thing. We are to rely on one another and serve according to our spiritual gifts.

If you're a prophet – then prophecy!

If you're a teacher – then teach!

If you have compassion – then be who you are called to be.

These are not selfish gifts ... they are gifts to be shared, worn out, and handed down.

Spiritual gifts are not to build up oneself ... but to build up the body of Christ.

Indeed, we are members of one another.

We are to be accountable to one another; kind to one another; and supportive of one another.

It is only by God's grace we are given this privilege.

Our gifts are what unite us. Not because we have been given a special ticket into heaven wrapped up in a pretty box ... but because by God's grace, our gifts are made known

in our actions.

When we live out our spiritual gifts we begin to imitate Christ.

Patricia Brown, wrote a study called ‘Spirit Gifts – One Spirit, Many Gifts’ says, “When we each take our place in the body of Christ, harmony comes to the body. Mutual interdependence is created when each person in the body is needed and valued.”

Brown teaches in her study how the congregation grows when those who imitate Christ loves and cares for its members … all of them. Every … single … one.

New and old.

Rich and poor.

Healthy and sick.

Annoying and easily liked.

Brown is convinced, “Persons outside our community see this love and care and are drawn by the ‘charisma’. With the Holy Spirit we invite those persons to join us in Christ. In a congregation where everyone is living into her or his gifts, the congregation grows both spiritually and numerically.”

Sounds easy, right? Not so. The church in Rome struggled with the sharing of gifts; the church in Corinth struggled; the churches in almost all of North America struggle to grow using this simple guidance by the Apostle Paul.

Why is that?

My guess is that we would like to be the church of Jesus Christ … with people just like us. It’s hard enough to imitate Christ … but spend time with people who annoy me? That’s too much.

I’m tempted to say, “just kidding” … but I’m not.

We have a problem! Covenant needs to grow spiritually and numerically. Hundreds of churches across our conference need to grow spiritually and numerically.

The United Methodist Church isn’t alone. Every single mainline denomination is in decline in America. Even many of the mega-churches across the country will tell you interest in their style of worship and mission and ministry has waned.

The statistics that report decline in American churches all agree on one thing: despite the fact 73% of Americans identify themselves as Christian, barely 30% practice their faith by attending church on a regular basis. (attending church once-a-month counts as “regular”)

We can be discouraged by those statistics, or we can look for the good news. I vote for good news!

The good news for us is that out of that 30% who attend church regularly … almost half of them prefer to worship in a church with less than 100 in attendance.

Why? I suspect it is because in a church with a smaller attendance it is easier to live into your spiritual gifts. You are not competing with a church with hundreds of others with a limited amount of offerings to express a person’s particular gifts.

After worship we will have another opportunity for people to hear about a possible building renovation of our facility. There are some aspects of it that are pretty scary. If we move forward with the project we will have to make sacrifices; we will have to tighten our belts and find ways to generate income.

But more important than making our building fully accessible is the need to grow …

spiritually and numerically!

Our conundrum is how do we grow numerically and spiritually if people who we want to have full access to the building can't even get in the door? On the other hand, if we installed four elevators and updated 10 bathrooms we would not grow if we did not find ways for people to identify and embrace and utilize their spiritual gifts.

I'm not afraid of decline. I'm not intimidated by a secular culture that competes for our young people's attention.

What terrifies me is that we would somehow fail in our lifetime to open the door of our hearts enough to help others discover what gift of grace God gave them ... and fall short of our call to be imitators of Christ.

I encourage you to discover for yourself your spiritual gifts.

I will assist and help you in any way I can.

I promise to walk with you with compassion as you learn to journey through life as an imitator of Christ Jesus.

May it be so here in this sacred place.

Amen.