

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Stuck with It – For the Common Good

I Corinthians 12.1-11

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Before Reading the Text

Chapters 12-14 of this first letter to the Corinthians “are the longest sustained treatment of a problem in the letter.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume X, J. Paul Sampley, page 940) What was the problem? Spiritual gifts. Apparently, there were some divisions within the church with some folks thinking that one person’s gift was more important, or more spiritual, than another – especially as concerned speaking in tongues. Paul attempts to say that each person’s gift is important – *for the common good* – and the fact that each person in the community embodied a different gift was the strength of the community. Differences are appropriate and should be expected and celebrated. It should be noted that perhaps the most famous of Paul’s writings immediately follows these words of wisdom. The hymn of love – *love is patient and kind and not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude*. (I Corinthians 13) It was a word for the Church then. It is the same word for the Church now.

READ TEXT

I shall never forget her words – in nine years of preaching, surely I’ve mentioned it before, but it bears repeating. Ann Davis, the Dean of the School of Social Work at Southern Seminary was the featured speaker at a training conference for Christian Women’s Job Corps – a program designed in the late nineties to help women move from dependency to self-sufficiency. And she was talking about spiritual gifts. Then, as is now, there are all kinds of inventories or questionnaires to fill out that will tell you what your spiritual gifts are. You simply answer a

bunch of questions about your likes/dislikes, what gives you energy/what are your passions, some personality indicators as assessed and, voila, it spits out your spiritual gifts. And then, once you know what your spiritual gifts are, then you put them to good use for God and for the Church and for the world. To this whole system of self-study and self-help, Dr. Davis said – phewy – that’s bunk. She said that a spiritual gift is only real when others see it in you. She said it’s not something you can discover for yourself, it’s only a gift when another recognizes it because you are using it and giving it away. Isn’t it just like us to be so self-focused and self-centered that we would spend the time and energy to answer a list of quick questions about how God is at work in our lives, as if we were filling out one of those Cosmopolitan questionnaires on what you are looking for in a mate.

If I could be so bold as to say – I think Paul would say – Right on, Dr. Davis. In a fairly gentle way, I think Paul was instructing this particular community of faith to see the gifts of another and call them out. But the purpose was not for affirmation. This was not a pat on the back and a few “good jobs” spoken. This wasn’t about recognition. This was about calling out the gifts of each other within the community – *for the common good*.

It’s been an interesting week to write a sermon. I started working on this text a couple of weeks ago – knowing it was Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend – but well before I knew there would be a catastrophic earthquake in Haiti. And that phrase, found in verse 7 - *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good* – that phrase won’t stop ringing in my ears. Martin Luther King, Jr., had the gift of rhetoric – it was his content that laid a foundation of Truth – “Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time: the need for man to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and

retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Stockholm, Sweden, December 11, 1964.); “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” (Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength To Love, 1963.); “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” (“I Have a Dream” speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom rally on August 28, 1963.) He had the gift of speaking truth to power. But it seems to me that his real gift was in delivery. His content was there, no doubt, but the way he said what he had to say, caused everyone to take notice – whether they cheered him or jeered him – they took notice. That’s the gift of rhetoric. And he used it for the *common good*.

And then an earthquake hit an already impoverished people, and people have sprung into action. C-130s are flying in one after another to deliver the gift of medical supplies and drinking water. Doctors are organizing to get over there to offer the gift of healing. News crews are giving us the gift of the story from the front lines so that we might know what is really going on. Every single group – religious and otherwise – who has departments to help in areas of natural disaster is using their gifts of organizing and rallying their people. The military is there to keep watch and offer aid and bring order – offering the gift of safety in the midst of chaos. And many of us have already sent the only real gift that’s going to matter right now – money. And all of this is coming together for the *common good*. Several prominent people of faith have spoken out this week – but they do not speak for me – for their words have nothing to do with the *common good*. Our work, our ministry, our money, our gifts – must go toward the *common good*. The *common good* is the focus of our faith.

What is it that our church has to offer for the *common good* that will continue to bring reconciliation between blacks and whites? Does our church have a gift to offer that might be for the *common good* that will help our country embrace non-violent resistance? What gifts do we have among us that we can offer to Haiti? We have to be asking these questions, and I believe we will find the answers as we recognize the gifts among us. But what if we were to expand our understanding of giftedness beyond that of singing or leading or teaching or number crunching? One journal I read said that “our ways of being in the world, those features of character that seem consistent from early childhood onward – predispositions, inclinations, curiosities, energy levels, orientation toward one occupation or another – may be more rightly and usefully recognized as gifts. This understanding of gifts can take . . . [us] well beyond talent scouting. What you can *do* may be a great gift to the rest of us (you musicians, cooks, dynamic speakers, and green thumbs), but who you *are* is the greater gift. [We need to] shift the focus from “what” you do to “how” you go about living in the world . . . When a community makes a collective decision to recognize and foster one another’s gifts . . . suddenly the human landscape around us is transformed by [seeing one another] as gift-bearers . . . how surprised one older woman might be to hear her habit of showing up a little early described as a gift . . . or a young man who has taken it upon himself to put chairs back in order after a class . . . or a young woman whose humming as she works lightens the spirits of the people around her in a busy kitchen . . . or a wise woman . . . who responded to the invitation to consider what her gift to her community might be (after pondering the matter in silence), ‘I’ve been through things.’ . . . It is in the nature of authentic gift-giving to offer what it is in us to offer, trusting that it may be of use, without insisting on an accounting of its value or effects.” (Weavings, “Every Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Vol. XXIII, Number 3, May/June 2008, pages 20-22)

And so I thought about us and realized that:

- When you show up each and every Sunday morning and unlock all the doors and get the coffee ready and even when you play with two very young boys when their parents are new to pastoral duties and were loaded down with Sunday morning meetings and responsibilities – then someone should tell Paul Ramey that that is a gift.
- When you have someone that can take a group of 4th and 5th graders and make Sunday School an honest highlight of their week – going the extra mile to incorporate all of their senses in learning with such creative energy that it is pure joy to stand outside their classroom window and just watch – then someone should tell Barbara Milford that that is a gift.
- When you have someone that spends countless hours at his desk at home making sure the finances of our church are accounted for and secure – then someone should tell Brian Smyth that that is a gift.
- When you have someone that opens the door into the sanctuary each and every Sunday morning, offering a smile (and a kiss for all the women) – then someone should tell Ted Morris that that is a gift.
- When you have someone that can really sing, but will not join the choir, stand in front of us on the occasion of their son and brother's baptism and sing with such ease and grace – then someone should tell Scott and Copelyn Bengel that that is a gift.

- When someone comes up with the idea to lead a senior adult exercise class and in the process becomes the unofficial Minister with Senior Adults – then someone should tell Debbie Brown that that is a gift.
- When you have someone that cooks the best collard greens around and she invites her pastor to eat lunch with her and he tells her that those greens were better than his mother's – then someone should tell Mary Alice Dossiter that that is a gift.
- When someone who is willing to continue learning even though he is well past school age – even stepping outside of his comfort zone – to attend the Souls of White Folks seminar to consider what it means to be a part of a cultural system of white privilege – then someone should tell Chet Helt that that is a gift.

“A gift is not something we acquire by our own efforts or even intentions. It is bestowed upon us, freely, without our having done anything to deserve it. It is entrusted to us. We may or may not put it to good use, but, in a sense, we're stuck with it.” (Weavings, “Every Lamp Trimmed and Burning,” Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Vol. XXIII, Number 3, May/June 2008, pages 20-22) Did you hear that? Stuck with it. Sure we can improve ourselves. Of course we can learn new things. Obviously we can make changes. But the bottom line is – whatever our gift is – we're stuck with it. The question is – are we stuck with it for the *common good*? Isn't it funny how often we desire what another has – discounting who we are by wanting to be someone else.

Paul reminds us of two important things – all of our gifts are from *the same Spirit* to be used *for the common good*. We need to be naming these gifts for one another – calling them out. And then, if you know your gift, live into it – use it, share it, gift it away freely. Opening doors

and teaching children and watching the books and offering a welcome and singing and exercising and cooking and learning . . . are but a few of our collective gifts. And when we put our gifts all together, for God's sake and for the *common good*, we can change the world – in Haiti, in Charlotte, right here. I really believe that. May it be so.