



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“You’re Gifted!” I Corinthians 12-13

After worship today, we begin another APC 301 class, the one we call, “Finding a Great Fit”. We use materials that help us identify our personality type, our spiritual gifts God has given us, our passions, our talents, and more. And after the class is over, we each sit down with a “coach” to tease out clues about “How God might love to work through someone wired up like me.”

The Spiritual Gifts portion, of course, comes directly from Scripture, and that’s where I want to go with you today. This may be a challenging moment for you, so let’s hitch up our courage, and turn in our Bibles to Paul’s FIRST letter to his friends at Corinth—First Corinthians, chapter 12. I’m going to read chapter 12 AND chapter 13, just so we get the linkage Paul is making in his extended directions on developing our walk with God. Listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text]*

Paul has received reports about chaos at Corinth. In an earlier part of this letter, we see him attacking distinctions Christians at Corinth have been fostering between rich and poor, and between those who have been converted by this evangelist, or that one, or the most recent one. Paul will have none of those divisions. Here, Paul attacks another discrimination mechanism used at Corinth—spiritual gifts. It sounds like the culture at Corinth was as individualistic as our own, so there may be something very strong for us here. Let’s dig in.

Paul begins chapter 12 by reminding the Corinthians that they had come from pagan religions; they had been looking up to idols. That was the tenor of the whole town. So to leave that behind and to join oneself with Jesus in that Corinthian context required something big. And, Paul says, that big thing is the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God. Only God’s Spirit can explain why some people “get it” about Jesus, and the people right next to them, don’t. True then, true today! So, Paul says, faith is itself a gift of the Spirit; leading people to trust Jesus as Savior and Lord is the Spirit’s main work. And therefore, everyone who has trusted Jesus already has one spiritual gift. The first part of verse 7 says that—to each one is given a manifestation of the Spirit. There is no believer who is not gifted. And that, of course, means you, too.

Congratulations! You’re gifted!

Paul’s next point is that it’s God who decides who gets what gift (or gifts), and when. The last part of verse 7 makes this big point—spiritual gifts are given by God, and they are given for the good and effective ministry of the church as a whole. So bragging about one’s spiritual gift makes no sense. A spiritual gift only has value as it adds to the group. It’s like the way you see admission tickets printed, sometimes; there’s a stub that says, “void if detached”. Spiritual gifts are like that—in fact, Christians are like that, since every Christian has at least one spiritual gift. There are no “Lone Ranger Christians”. We are void if detached.

And those of us who are not detached, we are barely hanging by a “chad”. But more of that, in a minute.

Paul really wants his people to get this--the proper relationship of the individual believer and the collected church--so he uses a common analogy of his time, the human body. To have a whole body, you need all the parts. To have a whole church body, you need all the gifts.

Now, there are two groups addressed by Paul's metaphor. The first people were probably the more troublesome; these are the people who thought they were something great because they had a dramatic spiritual gift—say, speaking in tongues. These folks were breaking up the unity of the church because they have been looking down with disdain on “less gifted people”. There could be actual acrimony, or there could be simply a cliquishness where the “highly gifted” were sticking to themselves, drifting further away from others in the church and from the Center, who is Christ. These first folks are “too gifted” for the others.

I have a number of friends who are school teachers or administrators, and in recent years, they have noticed a lot of parents pushing their children with expectations to achieve high marks early, and often. Sometimes, the parents are highly anxious that their kids not get left behind; after all, wouldn't they would be lousy parents if they didn't get the very best education for their child? In an article called, “Middle School GATE Anxiety—Parent Misconceptions about Student Success and Achievement”, Joe Bruzzese relates some examples of parent pressure to get their children into the Gifted And Talented Education programs in California schools. It seems that so many want their children to be in the Gifted And Talented programs because their kids might get more individual attention, and the expectations are higher. We have seen how powerful expectations of teachers can be on the achievement of the students. Parents WANT that for their kids.

Humorist Garrison Keillor taps into this when he describes his fictional home town of Lake Wobegone, Minnesota, “where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above-average”. This is fiction, but parents who have a skewed view of reality can push their child in ways that set up the child for failure, which some parents then feel is an attack on them. In his book, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*, David Elkind bewails the pressures and expectations from parents, the media and our computer-driven culture “that can lead to a wide range of childhood, teenage and adulthood crises. Children need time to learn, grow and develop at their *individual* pace.” (reviewed by Sonja Marcuson)

This GATE anxiety sounds an awful lot like the spiritual competition in Corinth! Everyone thinks they are above-average.

There is a second group Paul addresses in this part of his letter, but unlike the “spotlight-seekers”, these folks are hiding in the shadows; these are the folks who don't think much of themselves. They don't see themselves as gifted, for they aren't the obvious, “out-front” people who are the hands or eyes of the body of Christ. These folks feel like they're not good enough to belong to Jesus.

Paul attacks both the “too high” and “too low” attitudes with his “body of Christ” metaphor. All the parts of the body—all people who trust Jesus--are gifted by the Spirit. “Who gets what gift” has nothing to do with your individual merit, so stop bragging as if you have manufactured these displays of God's Spirit, he says. Second, there is no intrinsic graded scale of gifts; one's gift cannot be superior to another's.

Eugene Peterson puts it this way in his paraphrase, *The Message Bible*: (v. 19-24) “But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a *part* of. An enormous eye or a gigantic hand wouldn't be a body, but a monster. What we have is one body with many parts, each its proper size and in its proper place. No part is important on its own. Can you imagine Eye telling Hand, “Get lost; I don't need you”? Or, Head telling Foot, “You're fired; your job has been phased out”? As a matter of fact, in practice it works the other way—the “lower” the part, the more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes *no* difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?”¹ Don't you love that?!

Have you ever had an infected toe? A toe is so small, compared to the other parts of the body. Sharon makes fun of my toes, and I make fun of hers. But, boy, if we stub a toe, or one gets infected, it get the attention of our whole body, doesn't it?

Ask Nancy Ash, when she returns, how important the small intestine is. We've got yards and yards of intestines in our abdomen. Of what possible value is just a few inches? Well, a few inches of Nancy's intestine got clogged up, and that's very, very serious; without proper medical attention, people die of this. This “little” thing” required surgery, and because that's deep abdominal surgery, there's a long recovery needed. Nancy will be out of normal circulation for many weeks, yet. We don't think of the small intestine as important; after all, it is, well, “small”. But try to get along without it, or try to cope when it threatens to explode!

See, all the parts count. And all the parts of the church count. The low-esteem people can't say, “Because I'm not a gifted hand that plays piano at a concert level, I'm not really important; I'm not loved by God very much.” Bull-loney! And the gorgeous head of hair can't say to the little toe, “I don't need you.” Let's see that head of hair get to the store to buy her hair care products, with a little toe in excruciating pain!

I hope you have the gist of Paul's message here. But I want to push this further. Our problems in traditional Western Christianity are almost the opposite of what we see threatening the unity of the church (the small house congregations) in Corinth.

Bob Buford, author of *Half-Time*, a book that's really useful for people in mid-life, was interviewing Dr. Dallas Willard, a long-time Professor of Philosophy at USC, and an author of many books on Christian faith, most notably, *The Divine Conspiracy*. I've read several of his books during my doctoral studies. Buford was working on a follow-up book which has now come out, called *Finishing Well*, and his tentative hypothesis was that people go through stages in their adult lives. The first stage is struggle; the second is success—and he believes “most people can achieve a level of success if they have focus and determination” (p. 14). The third stage is significance, and the fourth is surrender, “which means being fully aligned with a higher purpose for your life.” (ibid.) Willard countered, “I believe the third step—significance—actually requires surrender. . . .Christians should be able to do that naturally. But frankly, Bob, they don't know how.” (ibid.)...

¹Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message : The Bible in contemporary language* (1 Co 12:22-24). Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress.

“What you seem to be describing, Dallas, is a *knowing/doing gap*, that even what we know, what we’ve been taught, what we’ve heard in sermons, what we’ve read in books, doesn’t seem to be a viable reality for most Christians. There seems to be a chasm between our knowledge and our ability or willingness to do it.”

“That’s very true,” he said, “and I would even put it in these terms: *We know about these things but we do not believe them*. Too many Christians profess to believe them because they’re expected to, but *profession* of belief doesn’t carry the action. Only *real* belief carries action. We live in a context where millions and millions of professing Christians do not believe what they profess because they’ve been taught that the important thing is to profess it, whether you believe it or not.” (pp 14-15, emphasis in the original of *Finishing Well* by Bob Buford. Nashville: Integrity Publishers, 2004).

See, I think we don’t trip over our spiritual gifts because we don’t really believe in such things. Not really. Because, for something to be a “spiritual gift”, it has to be super-natural, not just an excellent expression of my talent, charm, or smarts.

What’s the difference? Well, when has this church felt called by God to do something that only God could do? When have you performed ministry that is beyond your ability to accomplish? Don’t we usually plan to stay within our budget--that’s the “responsible” thing to do, right? Don’t we mostly look around at the folks we’ve got, and decide whether we can really do this thing God has laid upon the hearts of the body as a whole? Being responsible, for most of us, means being “risk-averse”, especially in the things of God.

So, what does such “risk aversion” SAY about our trust in God?

For some years, I’ve talked about “Act One” and “Act Two” for our church. If “Act One” had a title, it would be, “Starting a Church”. The early folks all had a rather uniform but unspoken idea of what “starting a church” should look like. And with the securing of the land and the completion of this first building, we have here the very symbol of success; we have “started a church”, for sure.

Now, what? We have success. But now, we’re looking for significance, to be surrendered to the One who is bigger than ourselves—individually, and together. THAT’s “Act Two”, which our leaders will gather to design next month. Will their specific goals be big enough, or will we just keep oiling the institutional machinery? (Please pray hard for that October 12-13 event!)

In the APC 301 class, we identify our spiritual gifts, passions, talents, personality type, and more. But I’m not sure our coaches yet are asking big enough questions. When we ask, “How might God love to use a person wired up like you?” do we really believe this person’s giftings are supernatural? If someone is gifted in “liberality” (which means, “raising and giving away lots of money for the purposes of God”), are we thinking of a few thousand dollars? Is that the limit of her or his human possibility? What if it truly were God’s possibility, God’s goal, one that no merely human talent and effort could achieve? Are we willing to dream that big? Or, are we too afraid? Aren’t we Christians really “functional atheists”, most of the time?

There are exceptions, of course. When we offer healing ministry—now moving to the “second Sundays” in October, November and December with our morning worship services--we take a big risk, for we are inviting people to come for healing that WE cannot do. It’s all about God’s Spirit showing up; it’s not about our skill or our gifting. [And what if God does not show

up? Won't we look stupid, or arrogant, or woefully misguided? Are we willing to risk that? Yes, apparently so! And we have healing reports that prove God has been showing up as, and after, we take such a risk.]

What if our tentative Burma mission outreach grows because God is in it, and we need to raise \$20,000 beyond our budget in four weeks to send 6 people to aid refugees there? Will we work for that, and trust God enough to buy 6 plane tickets when we don't have the money in hand?

If God calls us to plant another congregation, and that means \$50,000 more each year for five years—a quarter-million dollars—will we do all we can knowing that in our own power we cannot come up with that kind of money, but trusting God will provide for what God wants to do? Do we dare to dream any God-sized dreams, and take the risk of personal commitment to those dreams?

Do you have the courage to risk that comes from that kind of trust? Will you ask, like the father of the demon-possessed boy in Mark 9, to expand the little faith you DO have? (GOD LOVES THAT REQUEST!)

Will you enroll in this APC 301 class (or one of the next ones) to identify resources you can bring to God and that God has already given you, so that you can give more of yourself than you have, for the Kingdom of God?

With your gifts and talents and all identified, do you dare to ask your Life Group to hold you accountable for risking these things for God? In your Life Groups, will you challenge each other to a higher level of listening to God, trust in God, and risk for God?

Christmas is coming, and Sharon and I have for some years made Christmas gift lists for each other, to give each other some higher probability of giving pleasure to our mate. That doesn't mean we have to stick with those lists; it's just a start. Most of us, though, have given someone a gift, and discovered they never used it, never wore that tie, never read that magazine we bought and hoped they would enjoy. Wasn't that disappointing? And if it cost you whole lot, then perhaps you felt a bit insulted, too.

You're gifted--but so what? If you don't invest what God has given you, with the rest of the gifted people here, your gift is useless, value-less, and you insult the Giver.

You're gifted. Now what will you do with it—together with me, with us? For only together, taking risks with what God give us, can we be the body of Christ!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on September 30, 2007, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]