

Varieties of Gifts

1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

There is a story of an orchestra found in *Stories from the Heart* that illustrates our lesson today. Every section of the orchestra practiced separately and thought their way was the best. At the end of the story the town still had an orchestra but they had never put together a performance. God had given us a variety of gifts, but they must work together for the common good.

During a massive paradigm shift of the first century CE, the Holy Spirit went viral, even in places like Corinth, the Roman Empire port awash with Greek intellectuals, brash entrepreneurs, and cosmopolitan sensualists. Among the temple ruins of Aphrodite, Apollo, and Poseidon, assorted Christian home churches multiplied rapidly through an outbreak of divine energy.

Sustained and nurtured by God and evangelized by Paul, the early Christian community had been richly blessed and graced. In 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13 Paul enumerated the many gifts that have been given to God's people. His focus was on the Christian community living in Corinth, which, for whatever reason, had become competitive with respect to the spiritual gifts it had received. Some Corinthian Christians seemed to be claiming that certain gifts of the Spirit were better than others. Paul's response to this situation informed the Jewish Christians that the gifts of the Spirit are varied, and that this variety does not presuppose one gift to be better than another. Each gift is meant to contribute to the common good.

Paul began this part of his letter to the Corinthians by making a claim, namely, that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit (v. 3b). Thus only those graced by God's Spirit are able to make such a confession.

Then Paul focused on the theme of diversity and unity in relation to the blessings that the Christian community had received from God. Paul stated that a variety of gifts, services, and activities exists, but the same Spirit (vv. 4-5) and the same God activate all of them in everyone (v. 6). Therefore, no one gift, service, or activity is better than another, all have the same divine origin, and no one should be in competition with another with respect to the blessings and graces God has bestowed upon the community as a whole.

Paul made clear that each person in the community is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. None of the gifts of the Spirit has been given to glorify or build up any one person in particular; therefore, none of the gifts is meant to be self-serving. Paul's emphasis was on the common good. For Paul, every person within the community is gifted; all participate in the manifestation of the Spirit, and although the gifts may vary and differ, no one person is to be found lacking in the gift or gifts of the Spirit.

Paul listed some of the gifts that are to be found within the community and emphasized the fact that the same Spirit is at the heart of each of the variety of gifts. To one is given the utterance of wisdom through the Spirit (v. 8a). Wisdom is essentially a practical instruction on how to live properly and successfully (see, e.g., Prov. 1:1-6; Jas. 3:1-4:17). Wisdom includes knowledge and understanding gained from life experience, as well as knowledge and understanding about God and God's ways. The source of wisdom is God (Prov. 2:6).

Another gift given to various members within the community is the utterance of knowledge (v. 8b). Like wisdom, knowledge is given through the Spirit. Knowledge includes knowing God's ordinances (Ps. 147:19, 20), God's ways (Ps. 25:4), and even God (Jer. 31:34). Knowledge also includes knowing that only one true God exists (1 Cor. 8:1).

A third gift, faith, is also given by the same Spirit (v. 9a). Faith centers on the belief in God's reliability and is also identified with accepting Jesus as coming from God. For Paul, faith is central to salvation, and faith is the means by which we are incorporated into the body of Christ. The object of faith is God.

Healing as a gift given by the Spirit (v. 9b) can assume many expressions. Healing is the process of restoring meaning to life and can occur on physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels of a person's being. Healing was central to Jesus' mission and ministry (Matt. 4:23-25; 9:35) and was part of the apostolic tradition (Acts 4:14, 22; 5:16; 8:7; 28:8). As attested by Jesus in the Gospels, healing flows from the proclamation of the reign of God.

The ability to work miracles is another gift given by the same Spirit to various people (v. 10a). In the New Testament, the word "miracles" is understood as "mighty deeds," "signs," "deeds of power" and is associated with the activity of God (Deut. 3:24). In the Gospels and early Christianity, mighty deeds included healings, exorcisms, and instances involving control over the forces of nature, such as calming the winds and storms or increasing food or beverage supplies. Both Jesus and his disciples perform mighty deeds (e.g., Luke 8:22-25; 9:37-43; 10:17-20).

Prophecy, another gift given by the same Spirit (v. 10b), enjoys a rich tradition. Within the biblical tradition, beginning with Abraham, the prophetic spirit has been active. Throughout Israel's history, prophets have been proclaiming words of woe and hope while putting forth a vision of a new world order and a new understanding of leadership. The prophet Joel foretold the outpouring of God's Spirit that would result in widespread prophecy. This message was reiterated by Peter and came to fruition on the Day of Pentecost as shown in Acts 2:14-18.

Prophecy became the gift of not only a few people whom God raised up but also the gift of the community at large.

Three last gifts that Paul mentions are discernment of spirits (v. 10c), tongues (v. 10d), and interpretation of tongues (v. 10e). Discernment of spirits involved being able to distinguish what is of God and what is not. The gift of tongues is a spontaneous stream of articulate phonemes. This gift is central to Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Paul would like all of the Corinthians to speak in tongues (1 Cor. 14:5). For Paul, this gift functions to convince unbelievers of the Spirit's presence (1 Cor. 14:22). Paul emphasized the need for the gift of interpretation of tongues so that the one praying can be guided by the Spirit.

Paul closed this lecture with an emphases on the unity of all people, drawn together by the Spirit, who is given to all and who has baptized all into one body (vv. 12-13). For Paul, a church that is both diverse and unified embodies the body of Christ and the vision of God. **Carol J. Dempsey**

In this letter Paul's response to the Corinthian church's implied question—who speaks for God? Paul is clear: those who confess Christ crucified are the only ones who can be assumed to speak for God. (A similar understanding may be found in John 14:15-16, in which all who love Jesus and keep his commandments receive the Spirit.) Those who reject Jesus in their words and actions cannot be speaking by the Spirit of God, while those who proclaim the lordship of Jesus cannot help but speak through the empowerment of the Spirit.

The Corinthian church, at least as we encounter it in the letters of Paul, bears similarities to many modern American Christian communities. The church at Corinth seems to be full of individuals looking out for their own spiritual welfare and sharply divided in how they understood and lived out their call to be followers of Jesus. Paul was exasperated with these first-century Christians over their focus

on individual spiritual gifts. Mostly, though, it seems that he was upset at their inability to form a community. Stanley Hauerwas has observed that a community should be judged by the type of people it forms, and so far, despite some prodigious individual gifts, this gathering of Corinthians was having a hard time producing people capable of living in true Christian community. Paul's desire was to see the Corinthians show the proper respect for the body of Christ and for each other.

While there are varieties of gifts, varieties of service to the same Lord and activities activated by the same God, they are all given by the same Spirit. So although Paul goes on to provide a catalog of gifts that may have been present in the Corinthian church, he prefaced all these gifts with their uniting principle: they are given for the common good. Diversity of gifts is not about individuation, Paul says, nor is one gift superior to another; the diversity is important because all of these gifts are necessary for the body of Christ to be complete.

The “Body” metaphor is a reappropriation of a common Roman metaphor, the body politic. In the Roman political metaphor, each member of the body knew his or her place, and those who were clearly at the bottom of the hierarchy were asked to continue carrying out their tasks, however menial they might be, for the greater glory of the empire. Paul, however, is noting that, in contrast to the empire, within the body of Christ no one is more important, nor are anyone's gifts more important. All are equal in the eyes of God—Jews and Gentiles, slaves and citizens. It is a radical statement of democracy and equality that flies in the face of the powers of the Roman world; in God's kingdom, all are equal, all are loved, and wealth and power do not elevate one—or should not.

These spiritual gifts are part of the work of the community, to share them with each other equally, and to understand that spiritual gifts are given to all

individually for the common good and to the love to which we are called. **Greg Garrett**

For us, members of Unity Christian Church of Swartz Creek, Michigan – we have spiritual gifts - gifts of the Spirit, given at our baptism, given for the common good and for the benefit of the body of Christ. Perhaps the modern lesson from this text is: " When we reclaim God as the true source of vital and powerful spiritual gifts, our faith communities will be transformed beyond what we think is humanly possible. As in Corinth, we would see the Holy Spirit go viral. **Suzanne Woolston Bossert** Perhaps more than ever, the Christian church and individual believers need to be reminded of the power of Pentecost that is ours each day by means of the work of the Holy Spirit, whose presence was promised at our baptisms in Christ. **Beverly Zink-Sawyer**

Let us pray that we are not like the town orchestra, but know that our varieties of gifts are for the common good and the glory of God's reign.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16).