

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
January 20, 2013, The 2nd Sunday After Epiphany
 Psalm 36:5-10, I Corinthians 12: 1, 4-14
HAVE YOU OPENED THIS GIFT YET?

(Before service starts large wrapped present on table in front of Communion Table)

In one sense you have already heard this morning's sermon in the Children's Sermon. Every single one of us is needed in the Body of Christ.

We are needed in the Body of Christ that is made up by this church family, and we are needed in international Body of Christ and the universal Body of Christ, of which every single one of us is a part.

We could see as the children became the Body of Christ, that everyone was needed. And that is almost all that needs to be said.

Almost, but you know me, I can't preach that short of a sermon!!!

Plus, we need to set Paul's allegory of spiritual gifts back into the context in which he wrote.

. What did those first listeners hear and understand when they heard about the Body of Christ for the very first time?

Paul was writing to the fairly young church in the town of Corinth.

1st and 2nd Corinthians are actually Paul's response to letters that the church sent to him, asking about problems they were having, and how to be the church.

Unfortunately, their letters were lost in antiquity, but Paul's answers leave lots of clues about their problems.

One of those problems was that some people who had spiritual gifts that were very obvious in the congregation, were lording it over others. Or people were placing them on a pedestal as being more important or better Christians.

This meant that those who were playing quieter or less noticeable roles in the church were feeling that somehow their faith was inferior, and others were making sure they knew they were inferior.

This letter is such a big reminder that the church family has always struggled to be a family, and God can change hearts and lives, because the church in Corinth lasted for centuries.

The way Paul answered this church was actually very creative. The example of a group needing to function together like a body was one that the members of Corinthian church would have already known. That wasn't where Paul was being creative. This was an argument that was used by different groups in the Ancient Near East to call for cooperation; it shows up in a variety of literature from that time.

This allegory was most often used by leaders of governments, or city governments, to tell the lower classes that they needed to cooperate and stay in their place in the society. They shouldn't rebel against their leaders, or those in the upper classes. If they rebelled against the way things were then they would be responsible for upsetting the balance of their society. This argument was used to

keep the little people down and the powerful still in power. ¹

Paul on the other hand said that all the diversity of all the people in the church was needed. It took all of them working together to bring unity to the church. This wasn't about who was more powerful, or who had more money, or most importantly who had spiritual gifts that were more noticeable in public. Paul used an argument that was familiar, but he used it in a new way. He used it to call the church to equality, diversity and unity

In several places in 1 & 2 Corinthians Paul names the very diverse group of people that had converted to Christianity and now worshiped together.

The Corinthian church was filled with slaves, slave owners and free people, men and women, Greeks, pagans (meaning those who worshipped Greek and Roman gods), and people who had converted from Judaism, there were rich people and poor people, there were leaders known throughout Corinth, and those known only by their families and neighbors.

This was an incredibly diverse group of people who would probably have had very little to do with each other before they become followers of Jesus Christ. And now they were trying to figure out how to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ, and they were finding it wasn't always easy.

So Paul writes to them and says it isn't your differences that unites you,

it is that fact that all of you were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When you were baptized the Spirit of God made you part of the Body of Christ, the church.

What Paul told the Corinthians, and what God is telling us today is that we are all needed in the Body of Christ. Each one of us has been blessed by the Spirit of God with gifts that this church family, and the whole family of God needs now. All of us, young and old are needed.

As you listen to this list of spiritual gifts from the Bible think about where you hear your own story in this list. If you don't hear your story or your gifts, it just means that I didn't make a list that was complete enough!

Paul talks about the spiritual gifts of:

wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, comfort and healing for the sick, miraculous acts, telling the Good News story, distinguishing between spirits,

being prophets, teachers, ministers, listeners, encouragers, Bible study-ers, pray-ers, dreamers, and creators,

He names the gifts of using love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and faithfulness, (Gal. 5:22 fruits of the Spirit).

gifts of hospitality and being welcoming, being a joyful giver, serving others, administration, and using your faith,

loving and caring for children, the lonely, the lost, those in need, helping those seeking in their faith, and being a friend,

and this is only the beginning of the list

Paul says that every single one of us has been given a spiritual gift.

The first half of 1 Corinthians 12 tells about this gift:

--Our gifts may look different, but the Spirit of God is exactly the same in each of them.

Our gifts are from God because they start with God.

--God is behind all this gift-giving.

--God's power is in each of these gifts and in us as we use them. (see The Message translation)

--And God's Spirit decides who gets what;

which admittedly quickly does away with looking around to compare our spiritual gift to someone else's gift.

What is so amazing about Spiritual Gifts is that we have each been chosen by God to get our specific gift. They were chosen especially for each one of us.

And it takes all of us, using all our gifts to make up the Body of Christ.

And WHY has God given each of us these gifts?

God has given us the gifts of God's Spirit,
(these spiritual gifts)

for the good of everyone in the Body of Christ.

Whatever is inside your spiritual gift is for the Body of Christ;
and that doesn't just mean people inside this church,
it means your spiritual gift is important to all followers of Christ.

You are just as needed,

just as important,

just as gifted as everyone sitting around you this morning,

in our diversity there is equality and unity through the power of Jesus
Christ, as the Holy Spirit moves and breaths in each of our lives.

The Message translation puts it this way:

"Each person is given something to do that shows who God is:

*Everyone gets in on it,
everyone benefits.*

*All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit,
and to all kinds of people!*

The variety is wonderful. "

So here we are as part of the Body of Christ, and what we do with our lives makes more of a difference than we may have thought.

Here we are, each of us with gifts from God's Holy Spirit.

Have you opened yours yet?

Have you started to use what you've found inside?

What if you walk away from the present and don't open it?

What if you are not sure if the present is for you?

What if no matter how many times you try to set it down, someone else recognizes it as your spiritual gift and keeps handing it to you? That's what happened to me with my call to ministry.

And have you noticed that sometimes, once you've opened your present you keep finding additional presents tucked inside of it that need to be opened?

Have you noticed that sometimes you are handed a completely new and different present

from God's Spirit to be opened
 because you've changed,
 or a situation has changed,
 or the needs of God's people have changed?

And have you noticed that sometimes as you grow older, or wiser, or bolder, or more giving, that a whole new gift appears that you didn't even expect to receive?

As you as a church family move into a season of transition with my leaving at the end of February, you are all going to be called on to use your spiritual gifts in this time of change. This may be one of those seasons when God asks you to try something new, or to dust off something you've done in the past.

I can't imagine it happening here, but sometimes when a pastor leaves, members decide to stay home to watch and see what will happen next at the church. They decide to wait and see if they are going to like the Interim Pastor, and then one day the new Installed Pastor. They disappear and decide not to be active in the church's season of change, sometimes for more than a year. It's hard to ever imagine that happening here!

As painful as our goodbye is going to be, I believe that this church is moving into an exciting season of change, and together you are all the Body of Christ, and each one of you is needed in this new season of deciding who this congregation is and who you want to become with new leadership.

I too am entering into a season of my own change, as I listen for how God can use me in retirement. For 35 years I have always been in the pulpit on Sunday morning. I feel both nervousness and excitement about how God will call me to use my gifts, when I'm one of the people sitting in the pews on a Sunday morning.

The Gift-Sender, the Holy Spirit of God, has made decisions that are for everyone, everyone is touched by God when we use our gifts,.

And these truly are the gift that keeps on giving,
 because spiritual gifts don't wear out.

No matter how much you use them; there is always more of God's Spirit inside.

GO TO COMMUNION TABLE AND THE PRESENT

These are good presents we have been given for this new season that is opening before us,
 they are God's spiritual gifts to us,

and they only ask one thing of us:

That we open them and (open present).

use them for God and God's people. Amen.

¹ See: Interpretation Bible Commentaries: Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997, pp. 213-216.
 cf: SER-13-01-20