

January 14, 2007

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

Sermon: “You Are a Gift to Someone You Know” Rev. Bob Jack
Text: “*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit...*”

Sometimes we can be a little harsh in the way we treat other Christians. We fail to see the good things in a certain brother or sister, and we refuse to accept them as persons who have abilities to offer and spiritual gifts to share that are meant for the good of the church.

I heard about a church that was looking for a pastor. An elder in that church was sick and tired of the rancor and criticism that characterized and infected the Search Committee, and caused them to reject one candidate after another in their futile search for the “perfect” pastor. One night, he asked if he could address the committee, and they put him on the docket.

He said, “I have a cover letter for a resume from a person I’d like for you to consider for the job of preacher in this church.” So, clearing his throat, he began to read: “Gentlemen . . .

Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position.

“I have many qualifications . . . I’ve been a preacher with much success and also had some success as a writer. Some say I’m a good organizer. I’ve been a leader most places I’ve been. I am over 50 years of age. I’ve never preached in one place more than 3 years. In some places I’ve had to leave town after my work caused riots and other types of disturbances.

“I must admit that I’ve been in jail 3 times, but not because of any crimes I’ve committed. I don’t always get along too well with the religious establishment. In fact, they’re the ones who had me arrested. I’m not too good at record keeping, and I’ve even been known to forget some of those whom I have baptized.

“If you feel you can extend a call to me as your pastor, I will do my best to serve you.”

The elder looked at the Search Committee, and said, “So, what do you think?”

“Are you crazy,” the Chairman yelled. “Hire an over-aged, unhealthy, troublemaking, absent-minded, ex-jailbird? You have a lot of nerve even to suggest such a stupid idea to this committee.”

“Congratulations,” the man said, after he’d looked each member in the eye. “You just turned down the Apostle Paul.”

It would be hard for me to list all of the talented and gifted people I’ve had the honor of working with as a pastor over the last 30 years. There have been so many. But if I had to come up with names from among the several churches I’ve pastored, two people come immediately to mind. Deeply committed Christians with daily personal walks with Jesus; hard workers who could always be depended on to carry out their assigned tasks; prayer warriors and compassionate human beings, both of them. And both of them are recovering alcoholics.

And there have been times in my professional ministry when I’ve felt overwhelmed having to deal with counseling situations where alcohol or other chemical dependencies were involved, and I was inadequately trained to give counsel. That’s when I’ve put

people in touch with these gifted members, who could speak from their own experience, and step into the breach, and offer a sympathetic ear and shoulder to cry on.

Only in the church would those who are considered by the world to be “failures” – the addicts and the abused and the victims of broken homes – only in the church would these be given the name “saints”, and be seen as gifted individuals whose very wounds can become the means of healing someone else’s afflictions. Only in the church.

(Kairos teams)

Sometimes, in the church, our wounds, our failures, our sins, become our spiritual gifts. At least, they give us the opportunity to employ our spiritual gifts. We serve a risen Savior, who was also a crucified Savior. The cross, that great sign of suffering and failure, by the grace of God, has become the sign of our salvation. So why should we be surprised that in the church our weaknesses become our gifts? And the very ones who are the most deeply wounded, by

the inverted logic of divine grace, become those who have the greatest gifts to offer.

Some of you bake pies, and you offer them up as tokens of goodwill to new people in the community, to neighbors who are sick, to fellow church members who are going through tough times. Miss Alma Currence baked a pie, once, and God used it as an instrument of redemption.

You know, when I first moved to Steele Creek I kept hearing about Miss Alma's pecan pies and how, when she was working for food services at Steele Creek Elementary School, people would rave about the food she served there. Well, one year she fixed me a pecan pie for Christmas. And about that time a fellow came to the church looking for help. He had just lost his job, he told me, and needed financial assistance with rent and groceries for his family.

As he sat across from me while I interviewed him, he kept looking at the pie Ms. Alma gave me. After a few more questions about his situation, I asked him what was the best way we could help him. And he said, "Well, I could use help paying for my rent,

and my family needs groceries, but I sho' nuff would love to eat that pie.” So I gave it to him.

Whenever I hear someone quoting the apostle Paul where he talks of the “ministry of encouragement” I think of Ms. Alma and her pies. I’m not suggesting that making pies is a spiritual gift. It’s just that you and I can encourage other people in the faith, and maybe even encourage them *into* the faith, through sharing what we have with them – even something as seemingly insignificant as a pie.

Some of you write letters. When my mother was having open heart surgery last year, some of you wrote faithfully to her and offered her your prayers. Mattie Hamrick, and Virginia Winget, even Frances Campbell, though she was struggling with her handwriting due to the ALS, wrote cards to my mother during her convalescence, and that meant more to her than you can imagine.

It’s wonderful to have someone remember us and stand with us when we’re suffering and undergoing misfortune. And it’s also great to have someone share in our joys. That’s a special ministry,

and I believe that it's a gift, too. To share unselfishly in the good fortunes of others while not experiencing them, ourselves, necessarily. Too often the success and achievements of others are a threat to us. As Christians, they ought to be cause for rejoicing, because God is using another person to build up the church and its prosperity.

We never really know what it's going to take, and how little it takes, really, to share the gifts of the church with others who need a little encouragement and a stronger faith.

(Street person at mail box . . . took me by surprise . . . “How's it going?” . . . “Didn't mean to scare you. I just want to say that I really dig this new sidewalk. It's great that y'all built it for people like me.” . . . “Well, I'm certainly glad that it meets with your approval”).

What would our church fellowships be like if it weren't for the Wilson Byrums who greet us at the door with the gifts of helping and service? Or the Johnny Boyds who offer their gifts of humor and craftsmanship? Or the Claude Nocks, who contribute

the gifts of prayer language and peacemaking to the health of the body.

Claude Nock was an elder in my previous church. A soft-spoken man from the tidewaters of eastern Virginia, Claude was a peacemaker. He had a ministry of reconciliation, and he practiced it in our church.

After a particularly tough Session meeting, in which the sparks were flying, Claude spent much of the next day calling other Session members, trying to keep people talking to one another, and to prevent them talking *about* one another. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers.” Claude was such a blessing.

“We can disagree,” Claude would say, “but we don’t have to be ugly. Jesus wants us to disagree in a spirit of love.” And difficult as it was for some of us to accept, we all knew that Claude was right.

“I wonder what this church would be like,” one of the other elders once said to me, “if we didn’t have Claude to keep us in

line.” What would any church be without those who feel they have a special calling to be peacemakers and reconcilers?

Too often you and I dismiss this whole notion of spiritual gifts, thinking that what we have to offer is nothing compared to the great needs of the church. Whether those are financial needs, and your monetary contributions, or spiritual needs and your particular spiritual gifts. What could we possibly offer to God that would make any difference in the great scheme of things?

I was reading something the other day that mentioned Robert Ripley, the “Believe It or Not Man.” Ripley once pointed out, in trying to make a point about our contributions, that a plain bar of iron is worth about \$5.00. That same bar of iron made into horseshoes is worth one hundred dollars. If you pound it into a bundle of needles, its worth jumps to \$3,500. Make it into a pile of pocketknife blades, \$32,000. And if you turn that same ordinary bar of iron into balance springs for watches it is worth \$750,000.

Some people can turn iron into horseshoes; others can turn it into needles; a smaller few make pocketknife blades. Only a very

few can turn it into true tempered balance springs. But they're all using the same material. Just different gifts.

When a person is baptized in this church, we pray the gift of the Holy Spirit be upon him or her. When you receive the Holy Spirit, you get gifts of the Spirit. We give Bibles to the person who gets baptized, because in baptism we are reminded that God equips us for the calling to which we are being called, as disciples of Jesus Christ. And the Bible is the gift that illumines their way.

So I ask you, what is your spiritual gift or gifts? A test of any spiritual gift, according to the apostle Paul, is that it be used for the good of others in the church. That the church be built up as a spiritual fellowship. A spiritual gift is not necessarily a warm glow inside or a positive attitude toward life. A spiritual gift is something that builds up the body of Christ, the church. In fact, according to the passage I just read to you from First Corinthians, the test for whether or not a gift is of the Holy Spirit is if it edifies – “builds” – the congregation as a whole. If it doesn't, and it tears the church apart, chances are it is not from God.

I think that one of the greatest challenges for a pastor and congregation is to be the sort of people who can discover and claim and cultivate the spiritual gifts of our fellow church members. The church, as Paul reminds us, is a place of diverse spiritual gifts.

So, let me end with some questions I want for each of you to ponder: How well do we as a church discover and encourage and exercise the spiritual gifts of all the people in our congregation? How well do we use our gifts and affirm the gifts of others?

Something to think about! Let's pray.