

In what is my 235<sup>th</sup> Sunday sermon with you--YES, I count them--the point today is that everyone in the church has a part to play. Everyone IS important. in some sense necessary. Everyone is to participate. Everyone has something “to bring to the table,” as we say. Or as the sermon title says, we are all needed and called to serve

That being said, however, we need to be reminded of the context in which Paul says it. Notice this part of the letter begins, *“I beg y’all...to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...”* (4:1-3). Paul speaks of the *“one body... one Spirit...one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,”* (vss.4-5). Then, Paul says *“But to each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”*

Paul then quotes a few phrases from Psalm 68. That psalm joyfully rehearses Israel’s Story. It tells of God’s rescue of Israel in Egypt up to God’s Throne (the Ark of the Covenant) being brought triumphantly by King David to Jerusalem. God is celebrated like a king who, having defeated his enemies, then hands out the spoils to his people. Now Jews in Paul’s day read this psalm and associated it with a Jewish festival which commemorated God’s giving the Torah, the Law, to his people. So Paul sees a kind of analogy here to Christ. That is, after his death and resurrection, Christ ascended to heaven in triumph, like a conqueror, having defeated the world’s principalities and powers (Eph 1:21-22). Like Moses who “went up” on Mt Sinai and then “descended” to give the stone tablets of the law to the people, so the ascended Christ then brought down the Spirit and “gifts of the Spirit” to his people on earth.

So then we come to this subject of gifts of the Spirit. At vs. 7, Paul says, *“But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.”* Speaking of Christ having ascended in triumph, *“he gave gifts to his people,”* (vs.8) And now vs. 11: *“The gifts he gave were...”* And he specifies: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors/ teachers. *But this is not a complete list of the gifts.* Paul mentions these as some, not all of the gifts. Now notice WHY we are ALL given a gift or gifts of the Spirit. Notice he says, vs. 12, *“to equip the saints (that’s ALL of us “called in Christ”) for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (and then vs. 16) so “each part (each person) is working properly, [and] promoting the body [of Christ’s] growth...in love.”* It’s important to emphasize WHY the gifts of the Spirit are given to the members of the Body of Christ. They are for ministry. And everyone has a place in the ministry of the church. All are called. So, if you’re not an apostle, prophet, evangelist, or pastor/ teacher, it’s important to hear what else Paul mentions as Spirit-gifts in other places in his letters.

Probably the best known passage on “gifts” is 1 Corinthians 12:4-12. Notice how Paul speaks of the same origin of the gifts and same purpose for the gifts of the Spirit.

Hear Eugene Peterson’s *Message* Version of these verses: *“God’s various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit... 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: wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues.*

*All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what and when. You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works...Your body has many parts--limbs, organs, cells--but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of his one Spirit, we all said goodbye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which He has the final say in everything. This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized. Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain--his Spirit--where we all come to drink." Hear how the different gifts of all the members serve the same ends--our common life and ministry in Christ--as his Body in the world.*

In Romans 12:4-8, we read: *"As in one body we have many limbs and organs, you see, and all the parts have different functions, so we, many as we are, are one body in [Christ], and individually we belong to one another. We have gifts that differ in accordance with the grace that has been given to us, and we must use them appropriately. If it is prophecy, we must prophesy according to the pattern of the faith. If it is serving, we must work at our serving; if teaching, at our teaching; if exhortation...if giving...if leading...if doing acts of kindness....Don't get tired of working hard. Be on fire with the Spirit,]"* (N T Wright, *Kingdom New Testament*).

So the point Paul is making should be evident to us all. We--every one of us--need to understand that as part of the Body of Christ, we all have been gifted by the Spirit of Christ for ministry. No one is left out: *"But to each one of us grace has been given..."* says Paul (4:7). All are to be part of the ministry of Christ in the world so that,

as he says here, “*all of us come to the unity of the faith...to maturity, to the measure of the full measure of Christ,*” (vs. 13). And as you can see by this sampling, there are many gifts for the many parts of the Body of Christ.

So what should these teachings of Paul elicit from us? First, let us be joyful. We all have a place--a unique place--in Christ’s church. No one of us is dispensable. No one is to feel useless or negligible in the church. Maybe you have seen church signs that read: “*Pastor: Rev’d So & So; Ministers: All the Members of the Church.*” And that is right! In the charter of our (Presbyterian) Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., this teaching is affirmed with this sentence: “*On the ship of this church, there are no passengers. All are members of the crew.*” Whoever we are, we may and should be joyful of God’s calling and gifting each us. By Jesus Christ, he has declared us fit for service and equipped us to do his bidding, in a way that only each of us--with our gifts--can.

Secondly, we should feel privileged. We are joined to Christ by the Spirit to join in God’s work in the world. So with the joy, there is the privilege given to us by God in Christ and the Spirit. On the opening page of our denomination’s *Book of Order*, we read: “*The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church...Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God’s mission,*” (*Book of Order*, PCUSA, p. 1). Or let me put it this way. The mission of the church doesn’t originate with us--not the local church, not the denomination, not the institutional church at all: “*It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through [God the] Father that*

*includes the church,*” (Jorgen Moltmann, cited by J R Woodward, *Creating a Missional Culture*, pp. 27-28). WE are included and that means, as Calvin reminds us, our lives are not our own. WE belong to God, and are to be used by God, and we are to put the gifts of the Spirit we ALL have to that great and glorious purpose. That is privilege with responsibility.

Third, we all need to examine ourselves. We need to examine ourselves by prayer and self-consideration, seeking what our gifts may be. Sometimes we just aren’t aware. Maybe you have thought, “*God doesn’t need me, nor has he given me any gift.*” Perhaps, you have never considered that you have a gift from God’s Spirit. But, if you aren’t, you certainly need to be inquiring of yourselves, and of the Lord, how you are gifted to serve God’s mission purposes in the world. Maybe you could ask someone what they think your gift is. Sometimes it takes someone else, who knows us or knows something about us, better than we ourselves. We may even be surprised that what we think of as not particularly special, or ourselves as very special, is a gift after all. But again, our gifts are meant to relate to the carrying out of God’s purposes for the world and those around us, and wherever we find ourselves. Each one of us is meant to contribute to God’s purposes in a way that only we can. God has a unified purpose in view but with a very diversified display of humanity!

Again, using the Presbyterian Church’s (PCUSA) *Book of Order* (p. 2), in the opening chapter, under “The Calling of the Church,” we read: “*The Church is the Body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor 12:27-28).*” We should ask ourselves, “*How do I--with my gift or gifts--help the Lord*

*make the following things happen?”--again, things enumerated in our Book of Order:*

*The Church as a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone ...*

*The Church as a community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation.*

*The Church as a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.*

*The Church as a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God’s transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.*

So, again, we need to ask ourselves: *“How am I with my gift--or gifts--helping the Lord make these things happen?”*

Leslie Newbigin, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary and scholar in his *Signs of the Kingdom*, writes: *“The question which has to be put to every local congregation is the question whether it is a credible sign of God’s reign in justice and mercy over the whole of life, whether it is an open fellowship whose concerns are as wide as the concerns of humanity, whether it cares for its neighbors in a way which reflect and springs out of God’s care for them, whether its common life is recognizable as a foretaste of the blessing which God intends for the whole human family,”* (1980).

The work and life of the church needs all of us. We are all--each one of us--called to do that which Paul lays out before us. We all have a place, play a part, in the Body of Christ, which is his fullness in the world (Eph 1:22-23). The important word Paul uses here is the word “called”--*“lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,”* (4:1). The Latin word is *VOCARE*, and we get the word “vocation” from it, which means “calling.” There are all different kinds of voices

calling you to all different kinds of things in life. The challenge, sometimes, is to find out which is the voice of God calling you, rather than your own ego, or self-interest, or the urgency of the moment. Sometimes, we answer a call to this or that because we have to--family, emergency, friend, expediency, whatever. Sometimes, we answer the call to do something because we deem it good and necessary, and we give ourselves wholeheartedly and gladly to it. Sometimes we do what is necessary, even when our heart isn't in it, and sometimes we "hear the call" and give ourselves to things we shouldn't put our hearts into.

But God's call is different, and by the Spirit, God calls each of us to his work. And when it comes to our place in the church--and the local congregation--perhaps we can find our calling in the joy of doing--with as much of ourselves as we can muster--the very thing we love the most. As Frederick Buechner has written, "*The place God calls you is to the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet,*" (Wishful Thinking, p.95). Hear that again: The place God calls you is to the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. That's a way of saying that you may be surprised and delighted that one or more things that absolutely gives you joy on the inside, is what God wants you to use so as to give joy to others on the outside. You see, while the "gifts" of the Spirit are important, we need to remember each of us is a gift. Each of us is God's gift of us. Listen to your life; look at the story that is your life. It is unique. It is a gift, and each of us are meant to be a gift--a gift of God--to one another.

We are meant to be--by God's creation and redemption--bearers of truth, grace, and love to one another. Don't forget that. We have gifts by the Spirit, yes; and we are--each

our selves--gifts of God.

The church, with its many members, and its many members with many gifts, is like all the members of an orchestra playing magnificent music, or a great chorus, where every part is necessary. Each contributes to the whole, and all must contribute their part, for the piece to have all its glory. Or, like a sports team, where every teammate must do his or her job, in order for the game to work in their favor. The point of it all is that the church--as the Body of Christ--is a collective. We are all called, we are all gifted, and we are all about the same goal--God's mission in the world. Then is "*the whole body [of Christ] ...working properly, promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love,*" (4:16). And we prove "*living worthy of the calling to which we have been called.*"

This is message may be preached and heard anytime. But I think it is especially appropriate to remind you of it now, today. For you are about to enter a time of transition. You as that part of the Body of Christ are closing one chapter and beginning a new one. In order to do that, everyone here--in this congregation--matters. It's important--it's necessary--for everyone to consider your calling and gifts to build up this part of the Body of Christ-- to remember, "*On the ship of this church, there are no passengers. All are members of the crew.*" Amen.