

Gifts for the body of Christ

Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12–31

Luke 4:14–21

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:27, 31

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Introduction

An email note from a member of the congregation arrived in my inbox one Monday morning. “Watching the service on Sunday,” was how the message began; what followed was a timely message noting that it had been 18 months (to the day, I must add) since my wife Valerie died. It was a lovely note acknowledging my grief coupled with a word of hope and promise of continuing prayer for me. This isn’t the first note I have received from this person. “It’s been a month,” acknowledged the first one. Then it’s been two months, six months, a year. And I know that I am not the only one who receives similar timely notes from this church member.

What I would say to this church member, and to all of you who undertake to, similarly, support one another with the wide variety of, what seem to us, small gestures of kindness—in doing such things ‘you do the Lord’s work.’ In the twelfth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians he addresses the subject of spiritual gifts and says that God gives his people spiritual gifts and services and activities which are activated by the Spirit of God for the common good of his people. I would submit to you that this email I received is one of the myriad of spiritual gifts God gives. It certainly was for me. “Now there are varieties of gifts,” writes Paul, “but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

In the section of Paul’s discussion on spiritual gifts that we read today, he uses the human body as a metaphor for the church insisting on the importance of all body parts; “But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” We need all the people God gifts and gives for the church. And then Paul says, “But strive for the greater gifts.” Is Paul now

suggesting a ranking of gifts? He just said all are needed and necessary, is he now contradicting himself? If everyone pursues the ‘greater gifts’ then will the ‘not-as-great gifts’ disappear? Maybe Paul is anticipating what he is going to say next about ‘a still more excellent way,’ where he talks about the necessity love; And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love. Are these three the ‘greater gifts’ we are to strive for?

1. First, I invite you to note that these gifts, services, and activities are given for something greater than the individual who exercises them. These are not given so you have something to offer; you offer yourself and the Spirit of God gifts his people. “You are the body of Christ,” writes Paul. The ‘you’ in this text is plural. You together are the body of Christ—this is not to downplay the significance of the individual for, Paul says, each of you are individually part of this greater ‘you.’ Still, the purpose of these myriad of gifts is for the common good of his people. Recall that Jesus said that his disciples are marked by their love for one another. This implies that we are engaged together—that we know one another in fellowship so we can love one another. Love is a relationship activity. As much as virtual meeting is helpful in some circumstances, it is no replacement for being together ‘in the house.’ Faith is to be lived together with the Lord’s people. This is fundamental to the gospel. According to the gospel, a churchless Christian is a contradiction of terms.

Theologians Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon noted perceptively, that “In Jesus we meet not a presentation of basic ideas about God, world, and humanity, but an invitation to join up, to become part of a movement, a people. By the very act of our modern theological attempts at translation, we have unconsciously distorted the gospel and transformed it into something it never claimed to be—ideas abstracted from Jesus, rather than Jesus with his people.¹ The church began on the shore of the Sea of Galilee with Jesus calling some disciples to join him in his mission and every believer since joins that same company.

An emerging theological emphasis among pastoral leaders today is on the idea of the church as a community; a community endeavouring to meet the need many feel for a place to belong. There is truth to that—in addition to our Lord’s command to love one another there are over forty ‘one another’ admonitions in the New Testament. Yet, it is important to note that the community of his people is never merely for the sake of being a community, rather it is for the sake of Him who gave himself for us and a lost world. It is wonderful to note all the things this

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in a Christian Colony*, Abingdon Press, 1989. P.21

congregation does for one another. When guest ministers come to preach here they all remark to me on what a welcoming church you are. And this is wonderful. As our Lord would bring seeking people among us it is good to be a people that will love them when they come. But this is never merely to be able to say we are a wonderful bunch or that the church is the best kind of club to belong to...rather it is because we come together to walk with Jesus who drew us to himself in love and then turns us to one another to love. The gifts the Spirit of God gives are to serve the great purposes of God's redeeming love to rescue a wayward humanity.

2. Second, I also invite you to consider that the Apostle assumes that these gifts are given in the process of engaging in the work the church is commissioned to do. I notice that in Paul's discussion of gifts throughout his letters there isn't a chapter that discusses how to identify your gift. There are many admonitions on what we are called to do. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," writes Paul. Notice there is no special gifting required for these things. I would understand that the gifts are given in the doing of the tasks the church is called to do.

The question isn't, "what gift do I bring to the church?" Since you, collectively, are the body of Christ and individually members of it, the question is, what needs to be done? It is as we offer ourselves in what needs to be done as the church that we are gifted by the Spirit for the work. In the understanding of the Apostles, to be a Christian is to be engaged in the life of the church; there is no 'belong' without 'belonging.' Keep in mind that these are gifts the Spirit gives as he wills; I don't think they are ours to wield.

In the opening line of this chapter where Paul writes, "Now concerning spiritual gifts," the one Greek word πνευματικός, (pnyomatikoces) is translated with two English words 'spiritual gifts.' The word means 'relating to the human spirit;' that part of the human which is akin to God. So you could translate this word as 'spiritual persons.' My point is that it is the person who gives themselves to the work of God that is understood here. Spiritual gifts are not a separate thing from you like when you buy a birthday gift to give to someone. Spiritual gifts, services, and activities are given to you as you give yourself to the tasks the church is called to do.

I have three brothers and if you asked the Sunday school teachers who had these Clubine boys in their classes, which one do you think will become a minister, I would not likely have been top of mind. I do recall the growing sense that our Lord was calling me into pastoral ministry—it was not a career I would have

chosen. My question wasn't, what gifts do I have, it was, what does the Lord want done (and why is he calling me to do it)? In the church Christ gives pastors and teachers—it is part of the work that needs to be done. I simply gave myself to finally saying, yes, I will do it.

It often happens when I preach at a funeral or wedding among people who are not accustomed as you are to my preaching, someone will say to me, “you have a voice for radio.” (Of course some of my close buddies remind me I also have the face for radio too, such good friends!) I didn't become a preacher because I have the voice I have—it didn't occur to me that it was important. Is it an asset? Yes. It is a gift? In some sense yes in that God gave it to me but not necessarily in the sense of a 'spiritual gift.' I simply bring all that I am to the task of preaching. The gift of preaching is what the Spirit gives.

The gift of preaching is what happens in the process of doing it as the Spirit of God moves in our hearts as gospel is announced. Or as John Calvin said, when the gospel is preached the blood of Christ drips on the people. The gift of preaching occurs as gospel is announced and Jesus Christ looms before us in his ever-present reality and fulfills his promise to his disciples, 'whoever listens to you listen to me.' The same happens when our worship leader, in faith, reads the scriptures and God fulfills the scriptures' purpose that the written word bears witness to the living Word—it is in the doing of reading the scripture that the Spirit gives the gift. It seems that the Corinthian congregation, in the midst of doing what the church should do—worship of God—became enamoured with the gifts, particularly speaking in tongues, and though it conveyed to those exercising the gift some sort of spiritual superiority. Paul is laying the groundwork here to challenge that problem a little later in this letter.

The Spirit gives gifts for the work that is to be done by the church. Note what Luke says of Jesus; Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, began to teach in Galilee's synagogues. Did Jesus have a spiritual gift called 'teaching' or did he give all that he was to the task of teaching that was part of synagogue life? I think the latter.

3. Now, regarding Paul's comment about 'greater gifts.' Assuming that he has in mind this partial list of gifts he has just enumerated, including apostles, prophets, and teachers, what does he mean by 'greater?' Keep in mind he is still talking about the fact that “You (plural) collectively are the body of Christ;” what gifts are we collectively to strive for or to be eager for. The translation known as The Kingdom New Testament captures well the sentiment of this text, “You should be

eager for the better kinds of gifts.” Keep in mind it is the plural ‘you,’ not the individual “you,” as if Paul were saying which ones you ought to want to have.

In this paragraph where we find this note about greater gifts, Paul wrote, “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.” Let’s begin with the Apostles. They are first because they are foundational. The Apostles occupy a unique place in God’s economy because they walked with Jesus. We would not know about Jesus except through his Apostles; there are no Apostles without Jesus. Jesus is always with his Apostles. This is why the early church ‘devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching.’ (Acts 2:42) This is why we at Central United confess our faith with the Apostles’ Creed; it is why we study, read, and preach from the Apostles’ writings. We join their company when we cling to Jesus in faith. In the Apostles’ Creed, articulated early in the second century, we say we believe, “in the holy catholic Church.” In our generation, as in many that preceded us, there were voices that wanted to leave the Apostles behind. In the fourth century, when the Nicene Creed was articulated, clarification was made against such voices by saying that we believe “in one holy catholic and apostolic church.” Could you not understand that the gift of the Apostles is something the church needs to be eager for as a ‘greater gift?’

Second there are prophets. Surely this includes the older testament prophets who were preachers announcing that God in his steadfast love would fulfil his promises. I have said enough about preachers already. Third, God gave teachers. Why? There is a content to our faith that needs to be learned. This is part of the work the church is called to do. And as we give ourselves as a church to the work of worship, proclamation of the gospel and study of God’s word are we not ‘striving together for the greater gifts?’

Paul also enumerates other gifts including, forms of assistance and forms of leadership. I note with you, that much wonderful work in worship and gospel proclamation would soon grind to a halt if the toilets aren’t cleaned. Are not all the gifts necessary? We need financial people to do our bean counting or this work will grind to a halt. When we have guests to our church at weddings the beauty of the sanctuary is often commented on. The Bible calls us to worship God in the beauty of holiness and the property team’s work to keep the sanctuary beautiful reflects our commitment to the importance of our task of worship. In a similar way I could point to the work of each committee—just think about our music and technology. And we need each other in the pews worshipping—those at the front

prompt worship—worship is what we do collectively witnessing to a lost world that God is worthy of worship. And all this effort we put into facilitating worship is, I submit to you, to strive for the greater gifts.

You (plural) are the body of Christ. As your pastor may I say this to you gently and straightforwardly, this text implies that, for the church's work of striving for the greater gifts, we need all hands on deck.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
But strive for the greater gifts.