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1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11

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Two weeks ago, we learned from scripture we are the chosen of God called to live the chosen life. We all have a purpose for which we are created. All of us have different gifts and talents and therefore are called to share those things that are unique to us. If you want a brain surgeon you would not want me. If you want a computer programmer you would not want me. If you wanted me to be a cook at some five-star restaurant you would not want me. I do not have those gifts or talents.

But I do have some ordinary gifts that fit well with the ordinary life I am living as a Christian in the everyday world I live in. We live that chosen life often in the ordinary course of everyday life and when it seems fairly simply or when it appears to us to be difficult God is always with us to help us along the way. There are stories in scriptures that tell us when we say we do not know what to do or say, God will tell us. Today, the Apostle Paul shares with us the good news that not only does God call us as God's Chosen but God also bestows upon us the gifts we need to be faithful. How are we to use those gifts? Again, we do so by using the gifts we are endowed with in common ordinary ways in everyday life.

Unfortunately, when I talk about being called by God most people think I am talking about being called to me a pastor, or a missionary, or some other such church related profession. That is not what I am talking about. This is the focus of this sermon. I would like to encourage you to know that your Christian purpose and mission may have nothing to do with a profession, or it has something to do with both your profession and what you just do in the world.

Let's take a closer look at the text from I Corinthians for this morning for some affirmation that this is the case.

Quite frankly, as we have studied Paul's letter to the Corinthians we do not know many of the reasons for his first letter. The purpose for this epistle or the situation that gave rise to Paul's instruction is not known to us. Yet we can infer that Paul is writing to a bitterly divided congregation because "*Unity in Christ*" is the great theme that runs all through this letter. And, shortly after this Sunday's passage is the great "*hymn to love*" in chapter 13. Paul is encouraging the congregation to set aside all the things that might divide them and come together as a community of love.

It appears that at least part of the problem was that the community was divided over which gifts might be the better gifts.

Those with what they thought to be the "*better*" gifts lorded it over those they considered to have the lesser of the gifts.

You would not think that a community with a great diversity of "spiritual gifts" would be a problem in a congregation. How could too much Spirit be a bad thing? Paul has already told them that they have every gift they need (1:7).

He writes in chapter 1 beginning with verse 4, "*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift....*"

His fundamental point, in the second section of today's lesson, is that there is a great diversity of spiritual gifts, "*varieties of gifts, varieties of services, varieties of activities.*" But the source of all these gifts is the One Lord, the One Spirit, and this accounts for their unity.

In the "*Church*" spelled with the capital "C," there has always been the variety of gifts needed for the church to fulfill their mission.

So, Paul seems to assume that all Christians have diverse spiritual gifts. The issue is how these gifts will be used by the people in the church. Paul places their use within an ethical context.

He suggests that if they enhance the community of faith they pass the test of being spiritual gifts. He says all gifts are only gifts if they are *used* "for the common good." The community of faith test is the supreme test for spiritual gifts, as Paul will stress so eloquently in what we call the "*Love Chapter*," 1 Corinthians 13.

It always seems that in any congregation, then or now, there is a struggle for unity with diversity. So, let's think a little about how each of us have gifts and how those gifts can be used for the good of the "*community of faith.*" And, if you will allow me to I would like to define what I mean by the "*community of faith.*" I am not thinking merely of the church. I am thinking about the "*community*" in which our faith is lived out and that includes both church and were you and I go after we leave this place. You remember the song, "***The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is the people.***"

Where the people of God are there is the scattered community of faith.

If you were to ask me who were some of the "*saints*" in the congregations I have served during my life I would have to mention a couple of people who, if you knew them, might surprise you. Both of them are recovering alcoholics.

In that church, whenever anyone was afflicted with alcoholism, or was in love with someone who was addicted to alcohol, I put them in touch with one of these two folks. I would sometimes say, "*I don't know much about this problem, but we have someone in the church who has learned a great deal about alcohol the hard way. I'll have them call you.*"

Only in the church would those whom the world considers to be "*failures, or addicts,*" be considered saints, wounded healers whose wounds are the source of someone else's healing.

Sometimes, in the church, our wounds, our failures, become our spiritual gifts. Of course, we are, as Christians, attempting to follow a *crucified Savior*. The cross, great sign of suffering and failure, by the love of God, is transformed into the sign of our salvation. So why should I be surprised that our weaknesses become our gifts?

I am going to share a few examples of various people and various gifts, many of them ordinary gifts, the have served the community of faith. Similar gifts to what you may have.

Margarete baked pies. Her pies were somewhat of a legend. Her specialty was cream pies of various flavors. She had a "*just right*" crust and a filling that went on forever and a topping that stood tall. But it was what Margarete did with those pies that was a legend.

Whenever there was a death in the congregation, or someone was going through a tough time, Margarete would soon be on the scene with one of her lemon, coconut, or chocolate pies. She remembered who liked which pie and so she would match the pie to the person and the occasion.

Margarette's community of faith was not just limited to those of us in that church. It was also those in the larger community that she came in contact with. Some were not members of any church—but her pies were just as much a ministry.

I had more than one spiritual gift. She was a compassionate person and was there when she was needed. But she definitely had the gift of making pies. And she used that gift beautifully as a tangible sign of love and concern, support, and encouragement. In fact, whenever I hear that biblical phrase, a favorite phrase of St. Paul, "*the ministry of encouragement*," I think of Margaret and her pies. Although she would never think of her gift as a spiritual gift.

Probably I haven't said it just right. Margarette's great spiritual gift was not simply making pies, it was knowing that she, as a Christian, had an obligation to use whatever gift God had given her for the good of others.

At the Rockland Methodist Church where I served as a Student Pastor Mary wrote letters. Due to a debilitating nerve condition, she had mobility problems. She was confined to her home. But her spirit was very mobile.

Whenever she would hear some good news about someone in the congregation—or again anyone in our small community – a teenager who had been accepted at a college, someone who received a promotion at work, the birth of a new baby – Mary would write a letter. Someone who was ill or had a loss in their life it was Mary's letter that would find its way to their mailbox. Most of the folk who received letters had never met Mary. All of them were thrilled to have someone remember them with a letter.

It is wonderful to have someone remember us and stand with us when we are suffering misfortune. But it is also great to have someone there to share our joys. That was Mary's unique ministry. It was a gift. Too often the success and achievements of others are a threat to us. For Mary, it was a cause for communal rejoicing. She never connected that to a spiritual gift, but it was.

In any church, at least any church that I know anything about, there are bound to be disagreements, controversies, divisions. Joe Lanius was a peacemaker. To Joe had been given the ministry of reconciliation. After a difficult board meeting one Wednesday, Joe spent most of the day on Thursday calling on folks, attempting to keep people talking to one another. Jesus once said, "*Blessed are the peacemakers.*" Joe was a blessing.

"*We can disagree*," Joe used to say, "*but we have to disagree in love. Jesus didn't command us to agree, but he did command us to get along in love.*" I wasn't sure which specific Bible verse Joe had in mind when he remembered Jesus telling us to "*get along in love*," but we all knew that he was right.

"*I wonder what this church would be like*," one of our leaders once said, "*if we didn't have Joe to keep us in line.*" Joe was a leader in other ways than just holding an office in the church. He had a gift and he had a ministry, and it was a spiritual gift.

When each of us was baptized, the church prayed for each of us that we would receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Once one has the gift of the Holy Spirit, one has the Spirit's gifts. Some congregations have recovered the ancient baptismal practice of delivering to the newly baptized the instruments of baptism – a Bible, with the words "*proclaim the gospel*," and a candle, with the words "*you are the light of the world.*" These gifts are reminders that each of us, through baptism, is a minister, someone who is called, equipped to

share in Jesus' ministry to all the world.

And it is the idea of being Let me mention a couple more persons who a of being in ministry to all the world that make it important that we remember the definition of the "*community of faith.*"

Let me mention a couple more persons I knew who had spiritual gifts they used for the up-building of the community. I mention several different people who had different kinds of gifts so it might encourage you to explore what yours might be.

Robert Reid is another person who comes to mind. For many years we saw Robert ride his bicycle around campus stopping to talk to this student and then another, greeting the professor who happened to always be around about the same time Robert made his rounds. The smile he would give to those he met was an invitation to talk. You say what kind of spiritual gift are you talking about? I am talking about such gifts as compassion, hospitality, and wisdom. These are the gifts he used on a daily basis. He did so out of an understanding that this is what a Christian does.

Robert's primary purpose of being on campus was to put up the flags on campus in the morning and take them down again in the evening. Because of his physical problems he would ride a three-wheeled bike to make his rounds on campus but the people he touched would often find their way to his home for various reasons.

There are many in this church and I call your attention to one of our own whose memorial service was this week—Glenn Winstead. Glenn would tell everyone he was simple a farmer. But, he had other gifts. He and father and grandfather are the ones we are told who formed the Lime Stone Baptist Church across from Flamm's orchard. He and his wife Geri would walk along old highway 51 and pick up cans he would take home and crush and then sell them to recycle them to help support the Lime cemetery where he and his wife are now buried together. He and Geri worshiped in a rotation at three churches. First Baptist in Cobden, Lime Stone Baptist and here at University Baptist. He generously supported them all financially. But one day when he wondered why he was still around I told him I don't know about God, but I think one of the reasons was for him to sit in that pew, even when he could not hear very well as a faithful witness to his membership commitment and to the promise of God that he would worship on what we call the sabbath. Simple acts that are really spiritual gifts.

So, I ask you, What is your spiritual gift? A test of any spiritual gift, according to St. Paul, is that this gift be used for the good of others, for the building up of the community of faith. A spiritual gift is not necessarily a warm glow within or a positive attitude toward life. A spiritual gift is a gift that builds up the body of Christ, the community of faith. In fact, according to today's scripture from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, the test for whether or not a gift is of the Holy Spirit or not is whether or not that gift edifies that community as a whole.

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

So, I end with some questions for you to ponder: How well do we as a church discover and encourage the exercise of the spiritual gifts of all within our congregation? How well do you use your gifts and affirm the gifts in others? It's a question for you to ponder as we pray, and sing, and reflect this morning.