

## 1 Corinthians 12:1-12

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. 2 You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.

## YOU CAN'T WHISTLE THE FIFTH

A professor went to a children's concert, and on the program he saw this announcement: Daisy Smith is going to whistle The Finale from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. He couldn't contain his response. He said out loud, "She can't do that. That's impossible!"

He felt embarrassed about saying it out loud, and the folks sitting around him gave him some strange looks. But he was right.

Daisy may have been a very talented young lady. But, it's just not possible to whistle Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

It takes a full orchestra of strings, brass, woodwinds, and percussion along with a very good conductor. Beethoven's Fifth is no solo job. And any attempt to make it a solo would severely distort this masterpiece.

The same is true when it comes to the Christian faith. According to our passage, when it comes to the

Kingdom of God, all of us have a part to play, all of us have a job to do, but none of us are self-sufficient.

We are a part of a greater whole. Christian faith is not a solo job.

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to each of us not for our own personal, private benefit but for the good of the whole church, the Body of Christ. When it comes to the Christian faith we need a whole symphony. The whole church is needed to make this music, and Jesus is the conductor.

Doing it any other way would just not do justice to the gospel, God's grand symphony of hope as revealed in Jesus. It would be like trying to whistle Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. It's impossible.

## DO IT YOURSELF RELIGION

But, I'm afraid we have often settled for less than the full orchestra when it comes to the Christian faith. We've tried to whistle the Christian tune on our own, and the results are far from satisfactory.

There are many people today that say something like this, "I'm spiritual but I'm not religious. I don't believe in organized religion." (Now to be fair, we in

the church bear some responsibility for this. Our bad behavior and poor witness has indeed turned some people off to the church and organized religion in general.)

But, according to Paul, do it yourself religion is not a very good alternative. Do it yourself religion can lead to some very bad behavior done in the name of God.

That's what was happening with the Corinthians.

Paul founded the church in Corinth, and it was very successful. But, after Paul left to preach the gospel elsewhere the church at Corinth almost immediately ran into a big problem. It all boiled down to this: many members didn't want to totally leave their old way of life behind.

So in essence they created their own religion. They mixed their old idolatrous pagan ways with their newfound Christian faith.

And they even suggested that this mixed up faith was more advanced. They were the spiritual ones. They were the ones who spoke the true language of faith.

But, in fact, this do it yourself religion was a disaster. The church at Corinth was filled with all kinds of problems: sexual immorality, lawsuits among believers, divisions based upon leadership style, and outright idolatry.

## THE DANGER OF PRIDE AND CULTURE

What was wrong with this church? Why had they strayed so far from the life of faith?

According to Paul the root cause was pride.

They had decided to whistle their own tune instead of joining with fellow believers in playing the symphony of faith.

In order to play God's symphony of faith we have to play the music God has written in the Bible, and we have to do it together. The music is too complex and too glorious for one person to play it alone.

Those Corinthians may have said that Jesus was their Lord, but their actions told a different story. Jesus was not their Lord. Jesus did not rule their lives.

Instead, they were ruled by their appetites. They were ruled by the prevailing standards of the

surrounding culture. They were ruled by their desire to be admired and honored by others.

Don't be too hard on the Corinthians.

I think we have a lot in common with them. We too often take our cue not from the life of Jesus but from the ways of the world. We too have often compromised with the surrounding culture.

We too have allowed the faith to be used as a pawn by politicians and other power brokers.

No wonder many people have left the church.

The church has become in some instances just a reflection of what the world is saying and doing. Our song of faith is drowned out by the sound of other songs.

We have baptized the ways of the world instead of being who we are called to be.

And who are we called to be? We are called to be a provisional demonstration of the Kingdom of God. We are the ones who make the words of the Lord's Prayer meaningful. The kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven.

## NO LONE RANGERS IN THE CHURCH

So how can we escape the trap of idolatry? How can we become the people we are called to be and not succumb to the pressures of society?

Paul tells us that we cannot do it on our own. We need Jesus and we need each other. All of us are important. All of us have a spiritual gift to share.

But, none of us can be the Lone Ranger when it comes to faith.

This is the gold standard of how we evaluate leadership in the church. Gifts are given to be shared, and they are to be used to build up the Body of Christ, the Church.

And it is only when our gifts are shared that we can reach our full potential. We can only be who we are created to be in relationship with others.

Paul put it this way a little later in this chapter when he said that we are the Body of Christ and each one of us is a part of it.

Our gifts must be used to build up the community of faith, the Body of Christ. And if our gifts do not build up the Body of Christ they are being misused. Paul ridiculed the divisions in the Corinthian church by saying,

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”

All of our body parts are important. We don’t want to get rid of any of them!

And in the same way we need each other. We need each other desperately.

## NO DULL UNIFORMITY

We are indeed one in Christ Jesus, but that unity does not produce a dull uniformity. We are a mosaic of people given unique gifts by the Spirit of God in Jesus Christ.

The church is filled with people gifted in different ways. The church is filled with people who view the gospel of grace from different angles.

Sometimes people find this to be very threatening. We like to think that Jesus is like us. Look at the

various portraits of Jesus down through the years. Almost always his characteristics reflect the culture that is painting the portrait.

But, when we listen to the gospel message as it is told by someone from a different part of the world it takes on a different tone, a different hue.

Our view of the gospel has in some cases become so tangled up in the ways of the world that we don't even know that we have left the true faith.

One way to overcome this is to share our lives and our faith with the whole community of believers, to deliberately seek out those from different parts of the world who see the gospel through different eyes.

There are two reasons to send missionaries into the world.

One reason is to proclaim the gospel, to carry out the Great Commission.

But, the other reason is to hear the gospel in a new way, to learn from the gifts and perspectives of people from different places.

This gives us a better view of God's love and grace.

## THE REASON FOR GIFTS

We are not even a month past Christmas, the season of gift giving. I don't know about your family, but we have received a lot of gifts, an embarrassing number of gifts.

And the question for us is: what are we going to do with all these gifts? How are we going to respond to this outpouring of love from family and friends?

One response of course is to return those gifts and get what we "really want." I don't mind if someone does that. If we give someone clothes we often put the gift receipt in the present to make it easier to make the exchange.

But on a deeper level I find the after Christmas return of gifts to be depressing. Gifts are a symbol of the fact that we care enough about another person to give them something. And such a mad rush to return all those gifts the very next day just doesn't seem right.

Perhaps the best response to a gift is not to desire something else or covet what someone else got. Maybe the best response to a gift is to be grateful and use the gift that we have been given.

We do this because we recognize that these gifts are just a symbol of something greater, the love that we have for one another. The gifts draw us closer together. The gifts remind us that we are family. The gifts remind us that we are connected.

It's not so much what we get but how we use the gift that makes all the difference.

## GIFT AND GRACE

It is the same in the church. We might paraphrase Paul's opening sentence in our lesson for today by making it into a question: "Therefore, since you have received many gifts from God, what will you do with them?" (See 1 Corinthians 12:1)

The word Paul uses for "gift" has the same root as the word for "grace." In a sense grace means a gift, a gift given by God. The greatest gift of grace of course is the gift of God's Son, Jesus. In Jesus our sins are forgiven, and we are freed to live with a hope that is eternal.

But, God also gives us special gifts of the spirit, unique talents and opportunities that we are to use to advance the kingdom of God.

God gives good gifts to his children for the same reason that we give gifts to our children. God loves us, and God wants the best for us ... all of us. God gives us gifts to build up the family of faith and proclaim God's good news to the world.

Today (in the second service) we will ordain and/or install new elders. The Session has trained these elders. They have studied our Book of Order and our Confessions. They have learned what it means to be Presbyterian.

And one of the things they learned is that Presbyterians are very reluctant to put too much power and authority into the hands of one person.

There are two reasons for that. First, Presbyterians take sin very seriously, and we think that if you put too much power in the hands of one person that power is likely to be abused.

But, there is another more important reason that we always make decisions in committees, and it comes from this passage and others like it. We believe that God has given all of us gifts to use for the Kingdom of God. And if we give too much power to one

person there is a tendency not to appreciate and use all of our gifts.

Now that's true not only for elders and other leaders in the church but for every member of the church of Jesus Christ. All of us are necessary. None of us are self-sufficient.

## WHAT IS YOUR GIFT?

If you are a Christian, you have been given a gift for the exercise of ministry. And if you are not using that gift the church is not all that could be. The mission of the church is hindered by the fact that you do not participate.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not asking you to do everything. I'm not asking you to do something that you don't feel called to do. I'm asking you to do something. I'm asking you to play your part, your instrument in the symphony of faith.

How do you know what God is calling you to do? How can you discover your spiritual gift? There is a wonderful old movie, *Chariots of Fire*. And in that movie the runner Eric Liddell says, "God made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure."

Where do you feel God's pleasure? When do you feel that you are doing what God made you to do?

That's your gift. That's the instrument you need to play in the symphony of faith.

Now don't think that your gift necessarily comes from where you are strong. Quite often it is just the opposite. Quite often God uses our weaknesses, our failures, and our struggles as a way to give us insight into the needs of others.

And sometimes in this time of weakness and struggle and failure we discover the gift that God has given us.

I think about how God used Charles Colson after the failure of Watergate and his subsequent imprisonment. This gave Charles an understanding of and compassion for those who were imprisoned. And he started a prison ministry.

I think of those who have used their experience of grief or divorce as an impetus to start a ministry for others undergoing the same struggles. We will be starting our Stephen Ministry this coming week. Often the leaders in that program were called by some struggle, some need in their own life.

I don't know what God is calling you to do. But, rest assured that God is calling you to do something. God is giving you some ministry, some gift that will help all of us make better music for the Kingdom of God.

## TUNED TO JESUS

But, there is one thing that a good orchestra must always accomplish before it does anything else. It must be in tune with one instrument.

You may have noticed how this happens. The first violinist plays a note, and then all the other musicians tune their instruments to that note.

In the same way we must all tune our instruments, our gifts to the standard of Jesus. Jesus is the first violinist who gives us that note. Jesus is the standard by which all our gifts are tuned.

And before each concert we have to tune up. Before each meeting and each worship service we have to remember that Jesus is Lord. We have to remember that it is the Spirit of God in Christ that brings all of our divergent gifts and perspectives together to make holy harmony.

No, Daisy Smith can't whistle The Finale from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

But, Daisy could play a part in that production. She is no doubt a talented youngster. Maybe she could play second violin or perhaps an oboe.

And with other musicians she could do the music justice. With other musicians she could realize a joy and satisfaction that she could not obtain on her own.

And in the same way none of us can adequately play the music of God. At least we can't do it by ourselves. But, we can play a part.

It will take the gifts of many people working together in harmony ... tuned to the standard of God's love and grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

But, it can be done. The Spirit of God in Christ has given us what we need. We have the gifts. We have the musicians here and now who can play the music of the angels.

Let the symphony of God's grace begin.

Amen.