

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The Spirit in You: Provider”

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Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. 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.

Now there are varieties of gifts, 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. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 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. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

I continue to be grateful for Pastor Rachel’s guidance in this series on the Holy Spirit, “The Spirit in You.” Each week throughout this series, we’re dropping in to a particular place in Scripture asking, what does the Bible tell us about this often mysterious, powerful, comforting, even frightening Spirit of God? Last week we were in Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and this week we go to another of Paul’s letters, 1 Corinthians. Among the things you should know about this church in Corinth is that it seems that to some degree they were a gathering of individuals who thought they could make it on their own. And Paul’s saying no, you need each other, but even more than that, you need the Spirit. Let’s go to God’s Word.

[Read passage.]

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

A few years back, four friends went into the wilderness: two veterans of the Afghan war, one combat photographer, and one journalist. As all of them had seen more than their fair share of violence and each had some weariness in their bones, they were seeking retreat, seeking a reset, but most of all, seeking freedom. They went into what was left of the wilderness in the Eastern United States, mostly walking along railroads, dodging railroad cops and other authorities, and as one of them put it, “We walked 400 miles, and most nights we were the only people who knew where we were. There are many definitions of freedom, but surely that’s one of them.”

But as they travelled, off the grid, so to speak, while they felt the freedom only that kind of isolation can bring, they also became keenly aware of how connected they were, or rather how connected they had to be if they wanted to survive. Even the simple tasks of each evening’s camp—collecting firewood, scrubbing the pots, pitching the tents—became things they did for each other, that they had to do for each other, so that they could stay together. Thus, this small group of four became bound by something of a code, a law, an understanding

among each other that they needed to work together for all of them to continue this trek in the Pennsylvania midwinter.

Different tasks, different gifts for a group seeking life together are what Paul has in focus here in 1 Corinthians 12. He's speaking to the church, but it's not just a gathering of talents. The way Paul talks about it is something much more than a religious talent show. He uses the phrase, "spiritual gifts," and that's exactly what they are, but still then we can lessen just how important they are, usually by thinking of "spiritual gifts" just in terms of things one person might be good at.

Does that match how Paul talks about them? Listen to v. 7. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." "The manifestation of the Spirit." If we ever talk about spiritual gifts, is that how we think about them? "The manifestation of the Spirit," as in, this is how the Spirit of God is revealed to be at work through us, in a way that can be sensed, seen, heard, touched. This is the same Spirit who, as we've learned, brought order out of chaos at creation, raised Jesus from the dead, can breathe new life into a heart that is turned from the Lord, this immensely powerful, frightening, mysterious Spirit, and he makes himself known through the gifts with which he empowers the faithful.

Paul gives a number of examples of them here. The utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, the interpretation of tongues. And this isn't an exhaustive list. Elsewhere in Paul's writings, you could add things like service, exhortation, generosity, mercy, administration all to this list of spiritual gifts. Discerning which of these gifts perhaps you have been given can be a really powerful exercise, one that I'd encourage you to explore if you've never done that—there are a handful of good "spiritual gift tests" out there that can guide you in that. That's more than just a personality test or a list of talents. It's not just asking, "What am I good at?" It's asking, "How do I sense the Spirit of God revealing himself in how I act, how I speak, how I think?" Sounds different to think of it that way.

What's the difference, do you think, between what we would consider to be a personal talent and a spiritual gift? Got to be some overlap, right? I mean, if Paul lists something as a spiritual gift, surely that means it's something that someone is actually good at, right? It'd kind of defeat the purpose of a spiritual gift if someone had, say, the gift of wisdom and still thought that it'd be a good idea to drink orange juice after using toothpaste. You have to assume that a spiritual gift is something that you are actually gifted in, right? Well then, what distinguishes a spiritual gift just from a personal talent? What's to stop us from claiming anything that we're good at as a spiritual gift?

That's what Paul is trying to guide the Corinthians in. You see this church in Corinth had a whole lot of issues, but one of the big ones, it seems, just from reading the rest of the letter, was that they were very quick to think individually and less eager to think of the body, the body of the church. As in, they were very quick to think about what they might get out of church, and less inclined to think about how they might build up the church. Throughout the letter, we see that there were divisions in this body, divisions carved up according to what early Christian teacher particular groups had allegiance to, according to how they thought they should eat or not eat certain things, according to how much money people made, according to how individuals expressed themselves during worship, but maybe chief among them was the thought that the church was there to serve each of them, a place where each of them was free and empowered to do as each pleased. Can you imagine the chaos?

But that's not what Paul wanted. Definitely not what Jesus wanted. And it's not what the Spirit would bring about. So when Paul talks about spiritual gifts, he describes not just in terms of what they are but also what they're supposed to do.

First of all, they shouldn't lead the body astray, shouldn't lead the church into idolatry, but rather point the church to Jesus. That's what those first few verses are about. Don't be uninformed about these spiritual gifts. It's all too easy to be enticed to idols, but the Spirit always points to Jesus. So if a talent starts to point to itself, it's not the Spirit at work anymore.

Second, they should be for the common good of the church. A spiritual gift isn't for the purpose of an individual's personal expression of faith. It's how that expression of faith builds up the church, the community of faith. If one has been given the gift of knowledge, as in, perhaps, knowledge and study of Scripture or theology or church history or you name it, but then that individual only uses that gift to sit contently, pleased with how enlightened they are, then that's not of the Spirit. The Spirit builds up the church.

Third, no one gift is better than another. As quick as we may be to want to rank certain gifts or compare our gifts to someone else, that's not their purpose, for in task given to us, there is no place for jealousy or resentment, not when these gifts don't come from ourselves.

And you know the best thing about these spiritual gifts pointing us to Jesus, building up the church, and not being ranked? It's liberating. It's so good. It's so freeing not to be concerned about whether you are a "better" Christian than someone else, or whether one person seems better at one thing than another. That's not the point. The point is how the Spirit brings these gifts together in the life of the church.

Doesn't mean that's not easy to do: comparisons, jealousy, even resentment. It can be really easy. And just in case you think it doesn't apply to pastors, think again. For example, I wish I could teach a Bible Study like Fran Dotterweich. I really do. But I can't. Or I wish I could identify all the problems and solutions for our church building like Jim Mitchell, Beth Sterchi, Paul Kedrow, Katie McHargue, and the rest of our Building and Grounds Committee. But I can't. Or I wish I could command the attention of a room full of children for longer than two minutes like Mary Emily Morris. But I can't.

And here's the thing: it's good that I can't. It's good that you can't. You know why? Because as we go about the work of the church, the ministry, the mission, we are reminded constantly that we need each other.

Those four friends out in the wilderness learned that lesson. Some of you may recognize the story. It appeared as an article the other day, but the longer story is by a journalist named Sebastian Junger. They went out seeking freedom, and to some degree they found it, but anything short of complete isolation and subsistence-level survival, wrapped up in freedom was also their dependence on each other, and not just on each other but on all the pieces of society, flawed as they are, that knit us together. They would think themselves free and independent and self-reliant, but then they'd take stock of where their clothes came from, where their gear came from, even where their food came from, and pretty quickly it became pretty tough for any of them to think they were just making it on their own. They needed each other, as we need each other.

And that's more than just survival for us. I mentioned earlier in the service that today is Ascension Sunday, and Ascension is the day we remember when Jesus was taken up physically into heaven, meaning Jesus is no longer physically here with us, but entrusting his followers to continue his ministry and mission, waiting until he comes again, and that's a really big deal. Because that, in essence, is the same boat we're in right now, waiting for Jesus to come back, and in the meantime entrusted and, by the Spirit, empowered to continue his ministry.

That's kind of daunting task when you think about it. Whether you consider Christ's ministry in terms of saving souls, or reconciliation, or furthering the kingdom of heaven, or spreading the gospel, those are kind of

monumental, proclaiming the eternal truth of the cosmos, all into a world rife with division, pestilence, war. How are we supposed to do that?

That's the question that's probably in the minds of the new officers, these men and women who have heard God's call to service and leadership within the church as elders and deacons. "How are we supposed to do this?" Feelings of unworthiness, unpreparedness, or being completely overwhelmed can seep in pretty easily.

Well, we're not left on our own, nor are we left just to our own devices. The Spirit provides, but provides differently, to one person, one gift, to another, another gift. All as if to say once more, that should we feel tempted to think that this life of faith is something to be done solo, we are reminded just how much in the Spirit we need each other, and only when the church comes together is that possible.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.