

Sunday, 17 January 2016

[Gifts for building up the community 1 Cor 12](#)

[1 Cor 12:1-11](#)

We live in a culture that has become more and more obsessed about the self. It is teaching us to be narcissistic. Social media is often used for advertising the self. In the desire for self-esteem we can become self-absorbed and entitled believing we deserve more- we are special. The advertising we see continuously presents us with the message that we deserve better than we have. John F. Kennedy once said, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country”. We are being trained by our culture to think in terms of what our country can do for us. Paul might say, “Ask not what Christ can do for you, but what you can do for the body of Christ”.

The Corinthian church seemed to be dealing with a lot of the same issues that are present in our culture. Some seemed to have succumbed to spiritual pride. They were competitive. Some were puffed-up by their spiritual ability. They prided themselves in being “spiritual” people over and against the regular Christians. This was disturbing to the community and led to division and strife as egos rubbed against each other.

Paul writes to the community to correct their spiritual pride. He says that they have been given gifts by the Holy Spirit not to puff up their own egos, but to build up and serve the body of Christ- the church. These gifts are not for building up their own individual status. A person is considered touched by the Holy

Spirit not because of the ability to perform dramatic or powerful acts, rather someone is considered touched by the Holy Spirit based on their Christ-likeness which means a willingness to serve and build up others. If you want to know if the Holy Spirit is present then look for Christ-likeness.

Paul says that you know the Holy Spirit is present when someone confesses that “Jesus is Lord”, which is not just the verbal statement, but the reality of a life completely submitted to the lordship of Jesus. It means to recognize that Jesus is master in all areas of the person’s life. It is total allegiance. Absolute loyalty. And complete obedience. It is to recognize as the Collect for Peace says in the BCP, that to be in his “service is perfect freedom” (BCP, p11, second collect for peace, Morning Prayer). It means to live a self-sacrificial life, in imitation of Jesus. Rather than put spiritual gifts to service for one’s self, they are put to service to build up and encourage the Body of Christ.

In our reading it says that “no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ (12:3). This could mean a couple things. First, it could be in reference to spiritual persecution. Some might have been trying to get them to deny their faith by denying Christ. For example, they might have been trying to get them to say “Caesar is Lord” and not Jesus, and a part of that denial might have been to curse Jesus. But there is another possibility. The Greek can also refer to someone trying to ask Jesus to curse someone. All around Corinth archeologists have found curse tablets, which are tablets that call various pagan deities to curse competitors or rivals. It is like a magic spell that seeks to control supernatural forces to do your will.

Some might have brought this practice into the church and may have been calling curses on people using Jesus's name. Paul recognizes this as the height of self-centeredness. Instead of seeking to submit yourself to Jesus' will you actually attempt to twist Jesus to do your will to destroy an opponent. Such selfishness is evidence of the absence of the Holy Spirit.

I thought it might be helpful to actually look at the gifts of the Holy Spirit that are mentioned. They can be a little confusing, and we have to be careful about imposing our modern ideas onto these gifts. For example, we can tend to think in terms of "supernatural" and "natural". Those are pretty recent categories. Paul wouldn't have thought in those categories. God is active throughout our lives, not just in what we think of as "supernatural" events. If we say something is "supernatural" then that can also imply that what is natural has nothing to do with God. For example, God can heal using the medical system. What we consider a "supernatural" healing doesn't necessarily mean God is any more involved than in a natural healing. God is just working differently. So those categories aren't necessarily helpful.

Paul's teaching here is primarily about Spiritual Gifts as being in service to the community rather than the individual. Later Paul will use the analogy of a body. The parts of the body are for the benefit of the whole. For example, sight isn't just for the benefit of the eye. Sight helps the eye to direct the body. The eyes serve the body. The Holy Spirit gives the gifts necessary to build up the church and no individual has all the gifts- they are distributed among the body of Christ. I should also say that this is not a complete list of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit- they are

examples of gifts, but there are many more. (See also 1 Cor 12:28-30; 14:1-5; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:7-13).

In verse 8 he mentions the gift of wise speech, or the “utterance of wisdom”. “Wisdom” was a bit of a catchword in the Corinthian church. This is not just clever human speech, but it is speech empowered by the Spirit. It is probably the gift of communicating deep truths.

Immediately following this is the “utterance of knowledge”. It isn’t completely clear how this is different from wisdom. “Knowledge” was also a Corinthian catchphrase. The difference might be that wisdom is more holistic as in the application of truth to life. Knowledge might be more about information or maybe even a teaching gift. We sometimes make the same distinction. I’m sure we all know people who are smart but not wise. They have lots of information in their head, they can do calculus, but their relationships are a mess. They don’t know how to apply knowledge to their life.

"Faith" is mentioned next. This is probably different from the faith that every Christian has. It is probably extraordinary faith to support and encourage the community, especially in times of trouble or uncertainty. For example, at this moment our church is being troubled regarding decisions about same sex blessings. Some feel like the church is acting prejudicially towards people attracted to the same sex. They see this as a human rights issue. Others see this as an issue of Biblical ethics and that blessing same sex relationships is a violation of the Bible’s guidance in how to live life. So, at the world-wide Anglican primates’ meeting we can have national leaders walk out of the meeting,

and others being censured. This kind of issue can really shake the church. Those with the gift of faith can encourage the church and remind us that Christ is still Lord over the church and the world. They can remind the church that we have dealt with difficult issues before and the church is still here. They boost the morale of the community by reminding us that God is in control and that this one issue doesn't have to define us.

Next, Paul mentions the gift of various kinds of healings (more plurals than our reading). Again, we have to be careful about imposing the category of the "supernatural". Surely, miraculous healings are included here, but we shouldn't exclude more natural and medical healing of body, mind, and soul. We should also be careful about an overly simplistic view of healing and sickness. For example, when Paul prayed for the removal of his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7) God told him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Paul was being taught something in the midst of his illness, so we should beware of thinking overly simplistic about sickness and healing in our spiritual life.

Then Paul mentions deeds of power, or workings of power (our translation says "working of miracles", but that's a little misleading since the word for miracle isn't present in the Greek). There may be some implied miraculous activity here, but not exclusively. This could also include effective leadership, which can help the community to accomplish amazing things. Martin Luther King Jr. may have had this gift of the Spirit and accomplished what many people said wasn't possible. It's not necessarily miraculous.

Prophecy is a bit of a controversial gift. There are a number of ideas of what it means to be a prophet. In general prophecy is about speaking God's words to the people. It's not really about telling the future, though it may include a warning about consequences. In the Bible prophecy is about calling people back to the Law. Usually the people have strayed off the path God has set and the prophet is the sheep dog that calls the sheep back to the path. Sometimes we have this sense of prophets in some sort of trance, and speaking in riddles, but that isn't necessarily a biblical view of prophecy. The ecstatic prophet in a trance is more of a pagan Greek or Roman idea of a prophet. The Corinthians might have brought some of these ideas into the church when they were converted and were being disruptive to the worshipping community, so Paul emphasizes ordered and controlled speech (1 Cor 14:29-33). In the book of Amos prophecy is pretty much identical to biblical preaching-edifying, exhorting, and encouraging God's people.

“Discernment of spirits” or maybe a better translation is, “discernment of what is of the Spirit”, probably indicates a gift where a person can distinguish whether something is from the Holy Spirit, or if it is merely human generated, or maybe inspired by some other less-than-holy spirit. People can sometimes claim to be speaking for God and use that authority to be manipulative. As a priest I've bumped into these people. They will sometimes come to you with a full plan supposedly given to them by God, and you are not allowed to comment on it or critique it or question it, and it usually includes you giving them lots of money. So the gift to discern what is of the Holy Spirit is an important one for the community, to prevent it from being manipulated by the delusional or dishonest.

Paul speaks a lot about the gift of tongues, and that is another controversial gift. Paul here implies a plural- there are various kinds of tongues. So this is more than just one kind of phenomena. In the book of Acts when the Spirit falls on the disciples on Pentecost they miraculously speak in foreign languages they didn't know. There is also reference to an angelic language (1 Cor 13:1). Tongues might also refer to a sporadic release of longing or praise. Paul might refer to this in the letter to the Romans when he talks about sighs too deep for words (Rom 8:26-27). It could be inarticulate outpourings of the heart. Tongues might be the flipside of prophecy. Prophecy is articulate and intelligible and directed towards the people, whereas tongues are inarticulate and unintelligible and seem to be directed to God. Paul says the use of tongues are for private devotional use, otherwise they can disrupt the community (14:5-25).

In order to be used in public the tongues speaker is to have an additional gift which is the gift of the articulation of tongues speech. There has to be an articulation of what would otherwise not be understood by the community. Tongues expresses a release of praise to God, but then it can be articulated so the community can join in with it or at least understand it. This might be the gift of people who write hymns or write prayers.

I know that was a lot of information. What I'm hoping you will walk away with is two things. One is that you have a gift, or even multiple gifts, from the Holy Spirit. You don't have to be continuously surrounded by "supernatural" activity to have God's Spirit manifesting in your life. You have gifts from the

Holy Spirit, even if you aren't conscious of them, and even if they aren't in the list we just discussed. Secondly, and this is Paul's main point, I want us all to ask ourselves, how are our gifts being used to build up God's people so they can be more effective in serving the world? Are we using our gifts to serve ourselves? To build up our own reputation? To build up earthly treasure? Or, are we building up the church? ... We are invited to resist the culture of "me" and instead, by following Christ, think about "we". AMEN