

“Gifts of the Spirit”
1st Corinthians 12: 1-11
January 29, 2012

Dr. Don Dempsey
Presbyterian Church of Palatine
Palatine, IL

There is an old Hindu legend that tells of an ancient time when all human beings were considered gods. But the people **so lacked an appreciation** of their divine nature that the other gods decided to take their divinity away from them.

Brahman, the supreme god, wanted to hide human divinity where people would never find it again, and asked his fellow gods to help him find the best place.

One god suggested that they bury human divinity deep within the Earth, but Braham thought they would surely dig deep enough to find it there.

Another god wanted to sink it into the depths of the greatest ocean, but Braham thought that the humans would eventually learn how to dive deep enough to find it there.

Another god suggested they store it at the top of the highest mountain, but Braham thought that the humans would eventually climb high enough to conquer every peak on Earth.

Frustrated the council of gods decided that there wasn't a single place on Earth that human's wouldn't know and eventually conquer.

So Brahman himself began to think of ways to hide human divinity. He thought for a long time. Finally, he said,

“We cannot hide their divinity on Earth for they are determined to own the entire planet. But if we hide their divinity within their own being they will never think to look for it there.”

We humans have been looking for our divinity ever since.

Our New Testament Scripture lesson from 1st Corinthians says:

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in every one. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”¹

Paul articulates the existence of a variety of spiritual gifts, all of which are derived from the same Spirit. In Paul's description there are various spiritual gifts that come from the same Spirit; various services or ministries that come from the same Lord - that is, the Lord Jesus Christ; and various activities or work that come from God - the Creator God.

Among the many confused and wrong-headed notions about the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts that the Corinthian's seem to hold is the belief that the gift of the Spirit is given to individuals for individual use and gain.

Against that selfish misappropriation of the Spirit, Paul states in verse 7 that all the gifts of the Spirit are given for the good of the community, not the individual. Whatever form the Spirit takes within an individual, it must be for the "common good" if it is of the Spirit.

For Paul, there is an innate connection between the Spirit and service. Spirit and service are an equal and parallel means of expressing God's love and power to the community of faith.

As we read and comprehend sacred scripture and as we seek to apply its message to our lives, that message has the power to transform our lives by creating the possibility of getting us in touch with our own Spirit, our own divinity, our own gifts, which are for the common good.

Finding our spirit, our gifts, getting in touch with our very soul, requires us to look deep within. To do that searching requires we find space and solitude.

Parker Palmer in his book, “A Hidden Wholeness, The Journey Toward an Un-divided Life,” talks about the soul as being shy. He says the soul is like a wild animal:

¹ I Corinthians 12: 4-7

“It’s tough, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like the wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out.

But if we walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creators we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of our eye – but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.”²

When we are able to connect with the soul, realize our own divinity, hear God speaking to us, we are transformed and energized to share our gifts through service to the common good.

When I served as a Chaplain in training at a large mental hospital on Long Island, I had many memorable experiences, but the most vivid one happened on a one particular day when I was feeling depressed, lonely, and not sure I had any gifts at all to offer the world.

I was leaving a “back ward” where some of the sickest patients were housed. I had just visited several of them, and was thinking, “Lord, get me out of this place and fast.” I didn’t think that I had connected with any of the people I had visited that day.

I was walking with my head down and I sensed that a patient was heading toward me, someone who I had talked to a day or two before. As he got closer I could feel his energy. He yelled to me, “Hey Chaplain,” I looked up and noticed an incredible smile on his face, he said, “Give me five.” As we slapped hands and made eye contact, something very profound happened. I felt a joy rushing through my body.

This man reached out to me with love, something I was having a hard time feeling that day. He taught me that one human being can deeply affect another by the simplest means. He not only changed my day, in many ways he changed my life. There I was, this lonely, depressed, and

² Parker Palmer, “A Hidden Wholeness, A Journey Toward an Un-divided Life,” p. 58-59

insecure Chaplain “in training” and here he was the so called “mental patient” and he touched my heart. I felt so humbled and so loved.

The effect was an instantaneous down-loading of divine energy, the gift of God’s grace, an awakening of the spirit within. Biblical scripture recounts similar transfers of energy through a healing touch, especially in the miracle stories of Jesus.

Those healings stories were not “just” physical healings but also spiritual; they are meant to demonstrate the power of the divine at work in our lives, reclaiming us, reawaking our highest nature. As a result of Jesus’ gift of a healing touch, people bodies and souls were made whole and holy.

We see this same effect through in our gifts of service; they are divine acts of the spirit. Those of you who volunteer in our PADS ministry you have experienced it; you experience it when you visit someone in the hospital, or work in the church’s garden.

We ourselves become embodiments of invisible acts of power when we respond naturally and automatically with love, compassion, and kindness to people around us, just as that patient did for me when he reached out and touched me. For in so doing God’s divine energy was communicated and a miracle of healing took place.

The key to all this is faith, the kind of "faith" Paul refers to in verse 9, a special faith - a faith that enables the gifted believer to do extraordinary things. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul metaphorically speaks of a faith so all-consuming that it can "move mountains."³

My sister, Ruthanne, sent me this story awhile ago. It is a story about the famous Polish pianist Jan Paderewski. Unfortunately, there's no evidence that the Paderewski story ever happened but it is a compelling story. The story goes like this:

A mother, wishing to encourage her young son's progress on the piano, took him to a Paderewski concert. After they were seated, the mother spotted an old friend in the audience and walked down the aisle to greet her.

³ 1 Corinthians 13: 2

Seizing the opportunity to explore the wonders of the concert hall, the little boy rose and eventually explored his way through a door marked "NO ADMITTANCE."

When the house lights dimmed and the concert was about to begin, the mother returned to her seat and discovered that her child was missing.

Suddenly, the curtains parted and spotlights focused on the impressive Steinway on stage. In horror, the mother saw her little boy sitting at the keyboard, innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

At that moment, the great piano master made his entrance, quickly moved to the piano, and whispered in the boy's ear,

"Don't quit. Keep playing."

Then, leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in a bass part. Soon, his right arm reached around to the other side of the child, and he added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed what could have been a frightening situation into a wonderfully creative experience.

The audience was so mesmerized by this moment that when they left the concert that evening they could not recall what else the great master played; they only remembered, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

Isn't that the way it is with God? What we can accomplish on our own may or may not be noteworthy. Others may or may not wish to listen. We try our best, but the results are not always graceful flowing music. However, with the hand of the Master, the music we make will be more beautiful – because we take a risk, we have faith, faith in our gifts, and we play out loud when we didn't know we weren't supposed to.

The next time you set out to accomplish great feats, stop and listen carefully. You may hear the voice of the Master, whispering in your ear,

"Don't quit. Keep playing."

You may feel God's arms around you and you know that his hands are there, helping you turn your new beginnings into true masterpieces.

The child accepted the master's hands – and the master accepted the child's gift as a chance to teach him his great love of music, and the art of caring well for another human being, and doing so with great skill.

There is more power in the invisible realm than we can ever imagine. The power of love in kind words, kind thoughts, and a compassionate response, are just a few of the different names we have for the energy of grace.

Recognize the gifts that God has given to you – name them. Use and share your divine gifts – through acts of service for the common good.

- Smile
- Offer a kind word of encouragement
- Give a compliment
- Listen without interpretation – not offering advice, not trying to solve or fix the problem – just be present and listen
- Call someone when your intuition tells you to
- Offer a prayer for another person
- Prepare a meal for a person
- Refrain from judging another person
- Remember life is full of miracles and have faith that every difficult situation can change in a blink of an eye
- Remember the truth that there is no such thing as a small and insignificant act of service
- Begin and end each day in appreciation for all of God's gifts

In the silence and the solitude of our worship together and your quiet time, listen for the still small voice deep within your soul and may you feel the down-loading of God's divine energy.

Hear the words of Psalmist that we heard read this morning:

“Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
Your faithfulness to the clouds.....
How precious is thy steadfast love, O God!”⁴ **Amen!**

⁴ Psalm 36