

Magical and Mystical

Text:

“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.”
(I Cor. 12: 4-7)

Context and Purpose:

As the text makes clear, The Spirit is the One who gives and reveals gifts. The Spirit is the One who chooses and gives people gifts which point to God’s presence and activity in the world. If all gifts come from God, then no gift is less valuable than another. There are a variety of gifts and the Spirit activates the gifts as the Spirit desires. The Spirit gives some folk one gift and others multiple gifts. The important thing is not the gift or the number of gifts given, rather that the gift is to be used for the common good because it is from God and points to God.

In our culture we tend to see a person’s ability as the result of study and hard work. We speak of a person having a “gift” in a particular area, when what we mean is that a person has an aptitude or skill or expertise. In viewing “gifts,” “skills,” “aptitudes,” or “talent” in this way, the focus or light shines on that particular person. That “focus” reveals who that person is in a particular context. When considering this text through the lens of I Corinthians 13: 1-3 it becomes clear that the motivating factor for using a gift for the common good is that of love. That love must be seen in relationship with the love God has for humanity as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The gift is made manifest when used for the common good, and the love of Jesus Christ is seen/experienced.

The members of FPC have many skills, talents, and gifts that they regularly share with others. This is a very generous congregation. In this sermon I hope to point them to the space of grace God has opened for each individually and for our congregation corporately, to see the Spirit’s power at work all around each of us as we share our gifts with others in such a way that others are pointed to Jesus. I also hope to challenge them to think about what their own true, core gift might be...to purposefully look for the light the Spirit shines to reveal the gift.

Magical and Mystical

In our epistle lesson this morning Paul's letter to the church at Corinth allows us a glimpse into the dysfunction of one of the early Christian churches. That church, like so many across the ages is struggling with status of members within the congregation. In this passage, the struggling seems to be focused on who is more spiritual than another and it is all predicated on their perception of whose spiritual gift is the most important.

Paul founded the Corinthian church, has visited it and has written to them. While we have the only surviving letters written to the Corinthians, I and II Corinthians, Paul makes reference to other letters within these two. Reading these letters becomes less daunting if they are read with the big picture in mind. The big picture for the passage today is this is a congregation of Gentile Christians who are living in a social and political environment that is hierarchical; they are accustomed to a pecking order and they are attempting to rank order God's spiritual gifts in that same manner. Their specific concern is that those people who have the ability to speak in tongues are more important spiritually than those who do not possess such ability. Paul writes to the Corinthians to debunk such thinking. It is here that we encounter our Scripture passage today.

As a former geography and history teacher I find maps to be a handy tool when we are talking about a place other than our own community. This is a Bible Atlas. I want to share with you a map of what the world looked like during Paul's lifetime so that we can get a better feel for where this letter-writing between Paul and the Church of Corinth took place. Paul was here (point to a spot) in Ephesus when he wrote I Corinthians. Here is modern day Italy. And he was writing to the Corinthians here (begin to point to a spot and drop the book).

Excuse me! Sometimes it is hard to hold large books with one hand (lean down and pick it up pulling the edge of a paper so it shows. Act like I am going to continue.)

Oh, there is an envelope hanging out of the pages. (Pull it out and set book on pulpit and pick-up pages of letter.)

(Read a moment and "suck in air" and widen eyes) It is a letter...written in Greek! It is so faded, it must be ancient. Wait! Listen to this! It is Paul's letter to the Church at Spartanburg! Listen!!! This is exciting...

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Joe,

To the church of God that is in Spartanburg, to those who are redeemed in Christ Jesus, called to do Christ's work, together with all those who are in Spartanburg, Gaffney, Timbuktu, Haiti,

and every place in the world who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Every day I praise God and thank Jesus for you. God has given you grace in Jesus and by the power of the Holy Spirit your church has done so much in Spartanburg and around the world. When God gave you faith in Jesus you were also given the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit urges you to action, and opens the eyes of your hearts to see the needs of the people around you, and gives you the power to carry out these good deeds for God's glory and not yours.

My sisters and brothers who have faith in Christ Jesus, God has given you and me the gift of the Spirit. Each one of us has received this gift. This gift is revealed in each of us in different ways. Just off of the top of my head I can think of so many of you and how each one of you shares your gift with our church and even the world...your talent and passion for doing your good deeds is like a mirror reflecting God's love for you and for all of humanity. Take a quick tour of how you share your gifts with others.

The Sit and Stitch folk share their love of knitting by knitting prayer shawls to be given to people who are sick, homebound, or are in a tough place and could use a hug of love. The gift of knitting while sharing fellowship with others provides a tangible reminder to another that they are not forgotten, that they are loved. The knitted shawl is a reflection of Jesus' love. The time spent with fellow "stitchers" is a way of building relationships within the Body of Christ. Remember Jesus Himself often spent time in fellowship over coffee sharing conversation and a good laugh. I often find Him down at Hub City Coffee and Carriage House Wines when I stop in.

Think about the folk who help Jane in the kitchen prepare wonderful meals for us to share as a church family. Many of you quietly give your time to set the tables, to clean up after the meals, and to set Fogartie Hall up for Morning Song. You are sharing your gifts of organization and hospitality in these seemingly mundane activities. I have seen you working together to get the job done all while laughing as you share stories. Your efforts and attitude reflect the love of Jesus to others.

There are others of you who teach Sunday School or Bible studies. You are sharing your gift of knowledge and wisdom so that others may grow in these things. Your desire to help others grow in faith is a reflection of God's love. Your church is blessed by God to share the love of Jesus in so many other ways...music, mission trips, youth activities, Stephen Ministry, and just doing the things necessary to keep your church open and running on a day to day basis. You are reflecting the love of God to many people in our broken and hurting world.

Each and every one of us has been given a gift from God. The Holy Spirit reveals that gift to each of us and then gives us the power and ability to carry out the work. God gives each one of us the gift or talent, if you will, that is an absolutely perfect fit for us. There are many different kinds of gifts and talents and skills. There is great diversity in gifts just as there is great diversity in humanity. God calls us to use our talents for the common good, for the Body of Christ. When we are motivated by the love of Jesus to use our talents for the common good, God's love is reflected to those around us.

The Church in Spartanburg, the Body of Christ in Spartanburg has many needs. The gifts and talent and skills to meet those needs are present in your congregation. I know! I worked and worshiped with you! I hear from others of your work in Haiti, Arcadia, nurturing seminarians, and even in efforts to reform the General Assembly. Many gifts to meet many needs of God's people...

Imagine what your church would look like if every single member was a preacher...

Who would sing? Who would take out the garbage and vacuum the halls?

Or if everyone worked to keep your church and ground clean and running smoothly...

Who would preach? Who would visit the sick and the homebound?

Who would go on mission trips?

If everyone worked only on mission trips...

Who would manage the financial affairs of your church?

Who would arrange flowers and make arrangements to be shared with those in need of a little sunshine in their lives?

Who would lead support groups? Lead book studies?

Feed homeless veterans and care for children living in motels?

Who would be around to make SPHIN a reality?

I think you get the picture.

You and I are challenged to recognize the gift the Spirit gives us. We must be ever vigilant looking for the spaces the Spirit opens and draws us toward. I know, I know...I hear you...you have a job you just love. You look forward to going to work every day. And yes, I know you love your community activities. Those are all good things and I am glad they give you pleasure. But, I want to challenge you to think outside of those boundaries.

Virginia H. Shuler
I Corinthians 12:1-11
First Presbyterian Church Spartanburg
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Think about things that you do or even things that you think you might like to do. What is it that excites you? Many times the challenge for us is to forget about who we have been conditioned to be and have grown up to be. I was perfectly happy being a tent-maker; then I had an encounter with Jesus in the middle of the road. Jesus showed me a new way to look at life and what my true gift is...travelling all over creation sharing the gospel out of love.

In God's eyes all gifts are equal. In our socially and economically driven culture it is sad to say that we do not always see everyone's gift as being important. But, they are. Our gifts are as varied as the needs of God's people. God created you as a unique individual created in God's image. Your gift is just as unique. You and I are good at many other things, but they are not our true, core gifts. We have skills, but they do not give us true joy.

When I last visited you I pulled weeds in the church flower beds, cut the grass while Andy was on vacation, and even worked on the budget. What gave me great joy and peace was sitting with some of you while you were in the hospital in the ER and I sat with a few brothers and sisters from neighboring congregations while each was in Critical Care units and one died. I experienced deep joy as Holt let me sing with the choir and was able to proclaim the Word of God to you through music. Singing with your choir is amazing! The Spirit is present there...

Keep alert to where God is drawing you into the Spirit's work and inviting you into the magical and mystical space of grace...the love of Jesus. Be prepared to be shocked and amazed that you even have a notion of participating in a new activity...also, be prepared to be shocked and amazed when the Spirit changes your motivation for doing good deeds...when you do it no longer for self satisfaction but out of love for Jesus. Look for the light of the Spirit and let it draw you to action with joy. Trust the Spirit to empower your work because the Spirit has given you the gift and it is a perfect fit. You may have to look hard for the light...it may be dim until you get accustomed to looking for it. It is there. When you see it and walk into it, magical and mystical things will happen and Jesus will be in the middle!

The churches of the world send greetings. All the brothers and sisters send you their love and hugs. They send gratitude for the work you are already doing and they look forward to hearing the new ways you find to share your gift with others.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Our Lord HAS come!

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