



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

WAYS WE EXPERIENCE GOD . . . HOLY GIFTS

1 Corinthians 12:7

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The Summer Day

by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth

instead of up and down-

*who is gazing around with her enormous and
complicated eyes.*

Now she lifts her pale forearms

and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

*I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,*

how to be idle and blessed,

how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

Pulitzer winning poet, Mary Oliver, has pinpointed the question plaguing the 21st century. The feeling of guilt, "What should I have done?" with the heartbreaking question, "What do I plan to do with my life?" This question stems from a deep hunger.

People ache for their lives to matter. Whether at home or away, they want their lives to make a difference.

But there is a struggle,
ironically, in this age of frenetic activity,
people are traveling more,
working longer hours,
shuffling children to more activities,

caring for parents with greater energy,
than ever before in the history of the world...
there is a struggle to feel like any of it has purpose.

People of faith have an answer to this conundrum. Serve Christ, love others, worship the Lord. But for many, knowing this is not enough. There is still a void of meaning.

Mid-life crisis has existed for a long time now, but this void of meaning has seeped down even into the twenty somethings. But perhaps the greatest challenge is for those in their later years.

So many lose the feeling of purpose upon retirement or loss of a spouse. Many, many times people have shared the heartbreaking feeling with me that they simply don't know why God hasn't taken them to heaven yet, because they no longer feel of any use in this world.

But the good news comes from stories – across all ages – of profound purpose from simple moments. During my research, I encountered people of every age surprised by the palpable of being used by God to bless others... which leads us to our next mode of experience in our series:

Holy Gifts, Holy Purpose: Experiencing God through a sense of divine purpose in your life growing from a sense of usefulness for God's plan.

Once again, the scripture is simple brief and to the point. This time our guidance comes from Paul and it is another text, despite whatever level of faith we may have, we refuse to believe:

Each has been given a spiritual gift for the common good... 1 Corinthians 12:7

Often, people's lack of purpose comes from a common disease in our world – people lack confidence, confidence in their ability to do things that matter. This lack of confidence is different than humility. Humility is that whatever I can do I can only do it "through him who strengthens me." But the

belief that “I have no particular skill or talent” is really the denial of the Word of God and God’s power.

Paul insists that God has bestowed something special in the heart, mind, body, and soul of every single person. Furthermore, it is through this gift that God’s plan for the world unfolds!

Now identifying this gift is not something we can always do ourselves, because a spiritual gift is not necessarily an innate talent... though it can be. Take the disciples for instance:

Jesus did not choose those who were successful in the world. Rather he chose ordinary people, not well known, not of great wealth or poverty, just average folks, the ones who disappear by the billions into the lost memory of time; the people who no historian would ever write about nor novelist would pen a story; except that they encountered the Christ and used whatever they had to God’s purposes and so had the most profound impact of any 12 ever.

Sometimes, to serve Christ we even have to suppress our natural talents. The apostle Paul’s talent in the world was intellectual rigor, religious zeal, and dogged pursuit... but it turned out the devil is the one who used those for his purposes.

After Damascus, Paul realized God did not want him to use his intellectual rigor. As he said, “I became foolish, I did not use plausible words of wisdom.” Though drafted into professional baseball, my father left those skills behind to serve the Gospel. I have left behind my Nintendo skills for the Gospel.

In the end, the distinction between a spiritual gift and a talent is quite simple: whenever people experience God through you, your talent becomes a spiritual gift.

A further exploration will show that a spiritual gift benefits the common good...

... to the glory of God,

...by the power of God.

We shall examine each aspect, in turn, beginning with Paul’s assertion that a spiritual gift benefits the common good.

The Common Good...

It is how you use the talent that makes the difference. A talent to make money can be a regular gift for your life, but if it is used for a fundraiser for cancer suddenly it is being used for the common good. The gift of cooking barbecue can be a tremendous blessing, not only to our taste buds but for the fellowship that surrounds it.

And even the simplest of actions, in key moments, can make a great difference. A person might have the gift of conversation and could easily use it to spread gossip.

Wendy and I had a waitress that has served us many times recently say, “I just love married couples! Y’all are so great together!” That little comment brightened our day in a powerful way! Her observation blessed us!

A spiritual gift might be skill you have used your whole life but one day, in a confounding and frustrating moment, God opens your eyes. It is not always a feeling of the heart but sometimes a realization of the mind. At least that is how it was for one young teacher I interviewed. She is in her late twenties and teaches in a very challenging environment.

There were moments as a first-year teacher...I have students with drugs, in gangs, who have their only meal at school...they try you and try you each day... I should feel for them...but you are angry.. but then the anger reminds you...THAT IS THE REASON YOU ARE THERE.

It was precisely in the hardship and horror of drugs and pre-teen pregnancies, the stark reality of broken lives, that assured her God had placed her there. She had thick skin and stubborn resolve. That is what God needed there. Because if it was easy, anyone could do it.

The experience of using these spiritual gifts for the common good leads to the next powerful moment in the divine plan: the Glory of God.

...To the Glory of God

One retiree from a focus group experienced the typical moment of losing their sense of purpose. He was a business man in his professional life. He never had a sense that his job had any more purpose than putting food on his family's table, which was fine with him. He had always liked working with his hands and, over the years, had done various projects around the house. So, when someone invited him to volunteer for Habitat for Humanity he said, "Yes".

And, for the first time in his life, after seventy years, he experienced a sense of Holy Purpose in his actions through his gifts.

After a few months' work, he attended the dedication (when the house is given over to the proud new owner) and it profoundly touched him. She introduced her boys and explained how this house would be a safe place to call home. She was the first in her family to own a house and her tears flowed freely, filled with profound thanksgiving for all those who made it possible.

As he listened, he felt touched not only by having a purpose, but of being used as the hands of God to do sacred work in the world. The hands of God! What could be more energizing in all the world! Suddenly, his own tears were flowing as his heart sung praises to God for being used in such an awesome fashion. He saw the glory of God come about through the work of his hands and it knocked him flat!

Finally, as we use these gifts for the common good, to the glory of God, on a rare occasion we feel that all of it is happening by the power of God!

...By the Power of God

This is what Paul meant when he wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." He realized when he abandoned his need to argue, through his intellectual prowess, that God was working through him. Not by his skill, but by his lack of skill!

It is at these moments that you have a keen awareness God is literally, consciously, actively using you. Not in a generic intellectual realization, no, not at all. It is an experience of being a conduit of the divine intentions. Something like when you touch the static electric ball and your hair raises up. It is in seeing the effect that you know something is flowing through you and you are not doing it. And, God can create this delight with any gift or skill.

Some have gifts they don't see as divine because it is simply what they do in daily life. One Charleston college professor was caught off guard when a fellow church member asked him to help her write her obituary. She was dying and did not know him or the pastor of the church very well.

The request was a surprise, not only because he had no interactions with her, but he had never done anything like this in his life. He presumed she asked because he taught English. During the visit they came to know another and, indeed, it was clear she had only a few days left. They decided not only to write the obituary, but plan her funeral as well. Again, something he had never done.

Though she was not a regular attender, it became clear that she could use a visit from the pastor and a final communion as well. The pastor, professor, and another elder came to her room and, together, they shared the sacred meal. At the end she lifted her hands and, with enthusiasm and clarity beyond her physical condition, she declared, "I am ready to go!" And a few hours later she died.

This professor is clearly more of an intellectual and academic person – not prone to these experiences in his daily life. So being used by God, in this fashion and in this way, was a life-altering moment and a profound affirmation of the providence of God.

Paul wrote, *"Each has been given a gift for the common good..."* and that means you. So be ready, at any time, in any way, God might use you! And you will know the electric joy of serving this wondrous God!