



Three-Week Sermon Series

# BEYOND OURSELVES

JANUARY 16, 2022 | GIFTS WE SHARE



# *GIFTS WE SHARE*

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11

We have recently come to the end of what I suppose we might call the season of giving and receiving gifts; now, we are in the midst of the season of returns and exchanges. The gift receipt is a wonderful invention, isn't it; if you're giving the gift, it takes some of the pressure off on getting someone's favourite colour or clothing size just right, and if you're receiving the gift, well, store credit can be a nice treat if the gift given is never going to fit or isn't quite what you were hoping for. The alternative destinations for an ill-suited gift, of course, are to store it on the top shelf of the closet or at the back of a deep cupboard, or to give it away to charity. But we can honour and appreciate the feeling behind a gift given, even if the sleeves are too short or the colour's a bit off. Eventually, though, a genuine dust-catcher of a gift is going to become lost to our attics and basements, or grace someone else's home instead.

But some gifts – some gifts are special. Some gifts we keep forever; ones that are so meaningful that they will never leave our home or our memory. Can you think of a gift that you've received, many years ago, that you still remember or perhaps even still possess? Some gifts last, and either the gift or the memory of it stays with us, for a very long time: a family heirloom, perhaps, or something special from a dear friend or loved one; a wedding gift, or something more ordinary that was desperately needed.

Some gifts we keep...even if we have to dust them.

For the rest of the Season of Epiphany – in which we celebrate and remember all the ways that Christ revealed and reveals himself in the world – for the rest of Epiphany, we'll be taking a close look at three chapters from the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And two of those chapters are about the grace-gifts we receive from God. God's gifts can't be returned for store credit... but they can definitely collect dust on a shelf. So for the next three weeks, we're going to unpack and explore what Paul called spiritual gifts: what those gifts are, what we're meant to do with them, and what it is that shapes and empowers them.

Today, we're exploring what spiritual gifts are, and where they come from.

The apostle Paul was a travelling church-planting minister, staying for months or a few years somewhere to get a Christian community started before moving on wherever the Spirit led him to continue his work. But he always stayed in touch, sending and receiving letters and emissaries, and sometimes even stopping over for a visit. Paul taught his churches that the Spirit gives a variety of gifts to believers to build up the Church and for the common good. The hinge of Paul's knowledge of God was that by God's grace, we are saved through faith, and that this is a gift, something we receive freely and without earning it in any way.

Faith is one of three grace-gifts that are universally-received by every Christian, the other two being hope and love. Faith, hope and love, gifted to us by God, allow us to embrace and live Christ's call to right, life-giving relationship with God and with our neighbours. Without those three first gifts, our following of Jesus – our discipleship – remains a purely human effort and pretty nearly impossible for us to manage. But the grace-gifts of faith, hope and love, freely given by God to each one of us, enable us to follow him.

A contemporary Christian author who teaches about discovering and nurturing our spiritual gifts wrote that grace is the word we use to describe the human experience of being overwhelmed by God's love; that grace is God's love in relationship, continually present and calling forth our response. And to help us respond, beyond those first three gifts of faith, hope and love, the Spirit gives gifts to each one of us.

Paul touches on this idea of spiritual gifts in a few of his letters to various churches and Christian communities, really elaborating on the idea here in this letter to Corinth, and in letters to the churches in Ephesus and Rome. Looking at those three letters, it's clear that Paul wasn't trying to nail down a definitive list of gifts or capabilities that are Spirit-given; instead he seems to be pointing out and naming the gifts he observed or heard about in those churches or in churches like them. If we were to pool those lists together and update them into modern language for a 21st century church, we would read of a vast array of very different gifts of the Spirit, touching nearly every aspect of human capability and life together. Gifts like wisdom and discernment, compassion and teaching, leadership and hospitality, encouragement and generosity, healing and pastoring and preaching, praying and sharing the good news, and yes, even the less glamorous gifts of administration and taking care of our resources. And this is not a finished list; it's an evolving one, with many more spiritual gifts that we could add to it ourselves.

Something that Paul is crystal clear about is that each one of us is given at least one gift; no one is gift-exempt. He is also very clear that no one person has every possible gift of the Spirit; and we know from our own lives and from our observation of other Christians that people often have more than one spiritual gift. Often, we see Christians with unique constellations of gifts that feed into each other and work together. New gifts from the Spirit can also emerge during our lives while others recede into the background, and why that happens we'll talk about in a little while.

The main point that Paul was trying to make was that each person in the church in Corinth was uniquely gifted by God through the Spirit, and that these gifts were manifestations of the Holy Spirit, acting and speaking through them.

The Holy Spirit chooses our gifts, plants them within us, but these gifts are not, strictly-speaking, for us. God gives us many gifts and blessings – like those first three, faith, hope and love – which are for us, for our self-improvement, for the nurture and cultivation of our inner life and personal relationship with God.

But the gifts of the Spirit are different. They are gifts for service, gifts we make use of beyond ourselves and our own immediate concerns, gifts the fruit of which we share with others, for, as Paul put it in this part of his letter, the common good.

Speaking of letters, it's an opportune moment to investigate why Paul was writing to this particular church in Corinth about spiritual gifts. He starts the discussion in peculiar way: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed." So evidently, there was some questions and uncertainty circulating in the community about spiritual gifts. And then he goes on to make reference to their pagan ways, the former things they believed in and how they honoured those beliefs before they became Christians.

If we were to carefully read through 1 Corinthians, we would find a lot of phrases like this one, that suggest Paul is answering a question or addressing a problem that someone has reported. So although we don't have the letter that the Corinthians wrote to Paul, we can guess some of what was going on in their church based on the answers that Paul writes back with. And it looks like, in the matter of spiritual gifts, that the Christians at Corinth were trying to rate or rank one another's gifts by order of significance, and quarrelling about it.

Based on the picture that this letter gives us of the church at Corinth, their quarrelling over gifts is not terribly surprising. They quarrelled over a lot of things, and were deeply divided as a church; they were unsure how or if reconciliation and unity were possible for them. Their community of believers was fractured along multiple lines: different social and economic statuses, different religious and cultural heritages, different ideas about worship...they were even divided based on which apostle had brought them into the church, whose version of the good news they preferred.

And among the many problems and issues affecting their life together as a church, there was this one, about whose spiritual gift was the best or most important.

The first part of Paul's answer, which we are reflecting on today, first re-centers them on Jesus: if any of their gifts led them to turn away or speak badly of Jesus, then those were not gifts from the Spirit. The second part, Paul's balancing of a diversity of gifts that are all coming from the same Spirit, that addresses a more complex issue.

Other religious practices at the time, the "pagan" ones many of the Corinthian Christians used to follow, could get pretty wild: sacrifices and public festivals, drinking and partying. There was also a hierarchy within the practice of many of those religions: only some people were worthy of direct communication with the gods, people who were especially pure or gifted. The confusion is understandable; so Paul addresses it directly.

Paul makes the point that although there is a wide variety of spiritual gifts, they are of equal value and equal necessity. More importantly, they all come from the same Spirit, for service of the same Lord, activated by the same God. No one's gift is less valuable, less necessary, less a manifestation of the Spirit, than anyone else's. Paul believed strongly that God's work through a church's giftedness can't happen if those gifts of the Spirit are ignored, rejected, diminished...or left to gather dust on a shelf.

Paul's words speak as clearly to us today as they did to the Christians in Corinth. We are to discern, develop and deploy our gifts that the Spirit has given us.

It is my observation that, for many Christians connected to churches these days, the root issues underlying conflict and division around gifts are not that we think our gifts are better than another's, it's that either we don't recognise our own gifts as coming from the Spirit and then use them, or that we are content to watch other people use their gifts instead. Either way, Paul, I suspect, would remind us that it's a pretty poor show of gratitude to God to do anything less than recognise, value and use the gifts, the talents and the capabilities with which God has equipped each one of us.

The Holy Spirit chooses our gifts, and each one of us has at least one gift, one talent or capability gifted to us, through which the Spirit can work to reveal Christ to the world. The gifts are there, within us, filling us with potential, calling us to our particular way of serving...but that's all those gifts are – call and potential – until we meet God's faithfulness and generosity with our own. Until we answer that call, and nurture that potential, our spiritual gifts really do mostly just gather dust on the shelves of our hearts and minds. Our active participation is required to make those gifts shine.

Some of you may be thinking that you have already made use of your gifts in the past, and that you aren't able or up to giving what you used to give anymore. God is open-handedly generous with us in every other aspect of our lives, and he is in this, too. Our spiritual gifts are not set in stone at birth or baptism; we'll talk more about this next week, but suffice to say for now that our gifts are needed by the church, that is their purpose; and as the church's needs change and as we change, in our circumstances, in our abilities, our spiritual gifts will evolve, too, with new gifts and calls and opportunities appearing as others fade, as we move through our lives.

But there is always a spiritual gift or more for every one of us, and always a need in our church, in this church, for those gifts.

The gifts the Spirit gives are gifts of service, from and for the whole Body of Christ. The spiritual gifts are the gifts our church needs to flourish. That is the work of the Spirit: ensuring that needed gifts are present among us, at the very moment they are needed.

Now let's just pause and think about that for a second. We talk a lot about God being present among us, about the church – our church, St. Andrew's – being part of the Body of Christ, and we talk a lot about our hopes and worries for the future of our church. But I don't know that we think about this in precisely the way that Paul encourages us to, in his letters.

If we truly are a real and faithful iteration of the body of Christ, part of Christ's church, here in this place, at this time – and I believe wholeheartedly that we are – then the Spirit has already gifted us with every talent and capability we need to be a flourishing, vibrant church, even more than we already are. The call and the potential are both here, among us, already.

I'm going to digress briefly and take us down a rabbit trail, like a minister-mentor of mine always says. I want to make sure that we all understand the same thing when we say "a flourishing church."

The best guide I know of to determine what a flourishing, vibrant, growing church is, well, it's Paul's letters to his own churches. And I have not been able to find anywhere in Paul's letters where he measures the growth and health of his churches by asking how many people turn up to worship, or what kind of condition the roof is in, or whether they've got children and youth programs, or if they fundraise a lot, or if they've budded off a church plant of their own lately, instead of leaving that work to Paul.

Those things are part of a church, but they are only a part and not the most essential part – not even close.

When Paul checks in with his churches, he wants to know, how's your faith? is it in Jesus, and him crucified and risen? are you taking care of the most vulnerable among you and around you? do you love one another? do you welcome people in and root them deeply in your part of the family of God? do you work and worship together, without division and quarrelling?

Those are the marks of a flourishing church according to Paul, a church where every member, using their three grace-gifts of faith, hope and love, expresses the gospel in word and action, where every member knows their own particular spiritual gifts, and find nurture for those gifts at church, and uses them for the church, and celebrates the gifts of others. And together, are able to do more than one or two alone.

Spiritual gifts are what we need for our church to continue to flourish; and spiritual gifts of great diversity and variety, covering every aspect of our life together, that's exactly what the Spirit has given us. Everything we need is here; or more correctly, everything we need is in us: present within us, waiting, perhaps, to be revealed, needing always to be recharged and nurtured and fed.

And needing to be recognised and celebrated with awe for what they really:  
a manifestation of the Spirit in us, a means for revealing Christ to the world,  
and an affirmation that God is faithful to all the promises he makes to us.

We are just at the beginning of Paul's writing about spiritual gifts, and there are still a few loose threads and open questions. On the Corinthian side of things, the big question we've got for Paul has to be, how does celebrating diversity create unity among such a divided bunch of Christians?

And for us, the big question is, what are our gifts, and have we been taking good care of them? Or are they gathering dust on a shelf, untended and unused?

Our spiritual gifts may have changed over the years – mine certainly have – or we may still be discovering the depth and breadth of the Spirit's intent for us. Wherever you are when it comes to the gifts of the Spirit, manifest in you, I invite you to prayerfully reflect on that this week. God gives each one of us these gifts for a reason; what that reason might be is something we – you and I and the Spirit – that's something we are discovering together. Thanks be to God. Amen.