Spiritual Gifts
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Last week Amber told you that this fall we are focusing on the theme of “Finding Your Place in the Body of Christ,” and that as part of that we were thinking about various spiritual gifts and how to help you discern God’s calling for your life, and how that can fit into the wider ministry of our community. Part of the reason we are focusing on this topic is that in the past this church did what many churches (and sometimes other organizations) do. As people became more and more involved in our community we tended to just try to plug people in to our already existing wider church structure because we simply needed to fill that particular volunteer slot.

You know how it is: we need a Christian Education Committee chair—we have to have one to help run things and as a church it’s kind of one of our central missions to educate people about what it means to be a Christ-follower. So we need to fill this slot. But no one signs up and eventually we just start trolling for help. Volunteers – anybody, anybody? And eventually some poor soul that feels guilty or decides to take pity on us sheepishly raises a hand and says, “Okay, I will do that.” And we say “Hooray! That spot is filled!” and we quickly move on to the next order of business, never finding out if that person has any gifts for, or passion for, or vision of, or calling to any kind of Christian Education ministry (or how those things might fit in to the job). After awhile that volunteer feels lost in the shuffle. They have no energy for CE, because being a CE chair doesn’t use any of their gifts and it doesn’t feed or energize them in any way. It just becomes a job they do at church because no one else would do it. And before long they burn out and sour on volunteering. This system is ultimately unsustainable not only for that person, but for the community who not now only has a disinterested CE chair but is also missing out on the amazing things that person could be bringing to the table in some other capacity. But it doesn't have to be that way!

Our job this fall is to examine our personal selves, to look deeper into our visions, to listen to the spirit whispers on our soul, to identify the things that give us energy, the things that we have a passion for, and the gifts that we have to make it all work together. We call these spiritual gifts because when they are used well, they bear spiritual fruit—which ultimately works to transform the world into God’s vision of a peaceful and justice-filled dominion where all are loved and fulfilled.

Now let me be clear about a few things. Everyone has spiritual gifts, everyone. Even if you aren’t all that spiritual I am certain you have been gifted by God to do some things amazingly well. I am also certain that each one of you has a passion or vision for something that ultimately feeds your soul and makes getting up in the morning worthwhile. When you put these two these things together – gifts and passion/vision/calling – you can do amazing things that don’t burn you out, but rather uplift you and the wider community. (SLIDE)
So how do we figure out what these gifts are and how they can work in our lives? We start by examining scripture and seeing what the stories of our ancestors in faith can tell us about how God gifted them to make a difference. This morning we have two interesting passages that speak to gifts of evangelism and multiculturalism.

Let me stop right here because for some of you having heard the word evangelism come out of my mouth, your brain is going all sorts of places and carrying all kinds of baggage that is not very productive. Let’s unpack some of that baggage. Evangelism simply is spreading the good news of the Gospel. It is telling our story. It is telling Jesus’ story. It is telling God’s story. I hope that having come here you have experienced some of the good news of the Gospel—that you are all right now, beloved children of God, just as you are either broken and a mess or fairly functional. God is with you. God has forgiven you and loves your whole self. God is active in the world. God wants your participation. You come to understand that the Kingdom of God is near – abundant life is possible, not later after you are dead, but here now – abundant and blessed life is possible as we work together to make this the world God envisions – a world of justice and love and wholeness and beauty. That’s what I mean when I say evangelism and no, I am not willing to give up that word just because some people have abused it. I am talking about the need to tell our story and God’s story and to testify that our lives have been changed for the better because of what God, and God’s community in the church, has done in our lives. I am talking about the need to testify to what God is doing right now in the world, through us, to rebuild and heal the broken parts of creation.

Some people are particularly gifted in this. They are particularly gifted in reaching out to others and not just using words to testify (though many are gifted in that as well) but in using their lives to tell the story. Some people can enter into conversation with others and without badgering or bible thumping or making the other person feel uncomfortable, and they can share their story of faith even while they are honest about their still nagging questions of doubt. Do you know someone like that? Can you identify those gifts in someone? Maybe even in yourself? Do you wish you could do that or feel a call to do that? Is there a whisper in your soul about this? Then you need to consider this morning’s scripture lessons.

Part of the challenge of telling God’s story to the wider world is that often this message has to cut across different cultures, languages, value systems, life experiences, traditions, etc. Sometimes we think such concerns about diversity are a modern issue, but today’s scripture story from the book of Acts demonstrates that even in the first century evangelism required you to able to relate to, and talk with, very different kinds of people. It requires you to be open to whomever God puts in your path no matter their differences.

It is clear from the story in Acts that Philip is used to listening to God’s call on his life and using his gifts to spread the story of Jesus. God calls and he just gets up and goes. God sends him to talk to a traveler and it turns out this is no ordinary man. Not only is this traveler from Ethiopia, an entirely different culture and nation, but he is
also influential as a royal treasurer and, the true kicker in this story, he is an eunuch, a castrated man. This is such a significant piece of his identity that the text mentions it five times. But this Ethiopian eunuch is doing something strange: he is reading a scroll of Isaiah. He and Philip go on to have a little bible geek conversation about the scripture and how it relates to Jesus and at the end this man asks to be baptized. But this man would never have been admitted to a Jewish house of worship. Because quite clearly Deuteronomy, specifically verse 23:1, states “No one whose testicles are cut off or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (otherwise known as the very best memory verse ever).

One blog I read pointed out that “This law strictly forbids a Eunuch from entering the assembly of the Lord. Their transgression of gender binaries and the inability to fit in proper categories made them profane by nature. They do not fit. But despite the fact that in all likelihood he would be turned away by the religious establishment, the Ethiopian Eunuch sought God anyway.” And now God, having been sought, sends Philip to not only teach this man who doesn’t fit, but to baptize him, which is to make him a part of the community now and forever, a member of the Body of Christ.

So what does this story tell us now sitting here 2000 years later? There are some who have the gift of being able to tell God’s story, to testify, to evangelize, to spread the good news. And often those people are able to talk to a variety of different people in order to do so. Often those people are excited to learn about other people’s perspectives, to learn different languages, to drown themselves in other cultures. Often they can share the message in a way that respects another’s culture or religious beliefs, whether that be a culture from across the globe, or a different culture or set of people right here at home.

This is important because as this story tells us no one is outside God’s circle, not even, and sometimes most especially, the people on the outside or on the margins of societal norms. And this is part of what we said we wanted take on as a mission and a vision for this church. We welcome those who others do not. We welcome those on the margins. We welcome those who don’t fit in, who speak a different language of one kind of another. We welcome those who need a sanctuary, who need good news, who need to hear the story—our story, Jesus’ story, God’s story. And so we need people who have these gifts, who can relate to those from other backgrounds, who can share their experiences, who can maintain their identity even while enjoying and entering into something very different.

Paul said, To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.
Now Paul, as usual, is over the top and drama filled. That's what makes his metaphors so powerful. But he is saying something very interesting here. He is saying, “I enter into relationship with people outside my identity. I work to understand them and sometimes become so like them as to be able to use their language so that I can talk to them about God in a way they will understand.”

This is a gift. Paul had it, Philip had it, I think even the Ethiopian man had it. In this assembled body of Christ, whom can you identify who has those gifts? Who can easily engage with the other, who works to create and sustain inter-racial/cultural dialogue, who works to create and sustain religious interfaith ties? Who looks to share God’s story and the story of this church with everyone they know? Who welcomes those who come through our doors not quite sure what kind of welcome they will find here or how they will begin to fit in and become a part of the community?

And if you don’t have those gifts, what are you doing to uphold those that do? Are you identifying and appreciating these gifts in others? Are you willing to incorporate different languages, a variety of images, and sometimes even very different cultural practices into our worship experience? Are you willing to share with even those that are supposed to be “outside the margins” and are often very different than we are? Are you willing to examine your own deep-seated issues of race and gender and sexuality, and discrimination of one type or another – all the little isms – and begin to give them over to God? Because that’s how we grow into a more fully functional Body of Christ. That’s how we find our place in that Body and begin to heal it. That’s when our spiritual gifts will begin to bear fruit.

Whether you have these specific gifts I have focused on this morning, or something totally different that we will talk about in the weeks to come, please understand, we need you to use them and to support each other in their use. Because the way we are healthiest as a body of Christ is when we listen to God’s call for us as a community, and as individuals, and then utilize the gifts God has given us to accomplish those calls. That is when we’ll live abundant life instead of just talking about it. That is when we will grow as a church, not just in numbers, but in spiritual depth and authenticity. That’s when we will begin to make a true difference in the world around us as we work together. That’s our task this fall and I can’t wait to see the amazing fruit we will continue to bear as we embrace it wholeheartedly. Amen.