

***“Yes, we each have a unique gift...
and how and for whom we use that gift matters.”***

Third sermon in nine-week “Yes, And...” series: Passion + Humility
Yes, you feel what you feel...and you can practice humility.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 (*The Message*) + Litany of Quotes (see end of sermon)

When the Apostle Paul is writing this letter to the church at Corinth, he’s addressing serious divisions in the community. The congregation had split into various factions (1:11). One group reported they were part of the “Paul” faction, and another, the “Apollos” faction. Still others claimed to belong to “Cephas,” (1:12). Paul dismisses these alliances, these divisions as nonsense. “*Was Paul crucified for you?*” he asks rhetorically, “*Has Christ been divided?*” In fact, Paul thanks God that he himself baptized so few people in this specific congregation, precisely so that he can’t be claimed by one group or another (1:15-16).¹ You know how today we all want to have “Jesus on *our* side”...well, back then, it was *Paul* they wanted on their side.

And of course, Paul wasn’t having it. His desire for this

community was for them “*to be united in the same mind and same purpose as Christ.*”

Now if you’re thinking well that was probably easier back then for them than it is for us today. Look how diverse we are! Well, I’ll remind you that Corinth was a very diverse city with folks who are educated and uneducated, high and low status (1:26), Jew and Gentile, slave and free (7:17-24). The congregation at Corinth was rich in ethnic and social diversity. It was composed of the population of one of the Roman Empire’s major transportation hubs. So Paul’s call to have the “*same mind and purpose*” was not easy. It also wasn’t asking individuals to relinquish their distinctive identities. He does not seek to erase diversity in the church of Corinth, rather in the very first chapter, Paul grounds the

¹ Doug Hume, “Paul’s Call to Unity and Dr. King’s Legacy (1 Corinthians 1:10-17),” *Patheos* (20 Jan. 2014), accessed on 20 Jan. 2019 at

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/onscripture/2014/01/pauls-call-to-unity-and-dr-kings-legacy-1-corinthians-110-17/>.

Corinthians' unity in the power of Christ (1:17). And his point is that Jesus' undeserved suffering, crucifixion, and death has the power to get them fired up and transform a broken and factionalized little church into a community that has a shared, transformative purpose.²...a purpose of carrying out the love of Christ in ways that would dismantle the very systems and egos and power structures that got Jesus crucified in the first place.

And we learn in chapter 12, that Paul thinks they have what it takes. You see, by all accounts according to Paul, the Corinthians had a full measure of the Spirit's power. Prophecy, healing, understanding, speaking in tongues, and the interpretation of tongues, knowledge, etc.: the Corinthians had them all and more. Yet they also had conflict, immorality, and thoughtless disregard for one another.³ And so their issue wasn't whether they were gifted or skilled. It was "on whose behalf were they using those gifts and skills?" They were self-indulgent...only using their gifts to serve themselves.

² Hume, *ibid.*

³ Mary Hinkle Shore, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11," *Working Preacher* (27 May 2012), accessed on 20 Jan. 2019 at

So how do we tell if we are using our gifts in a self-indulgent way or a Spirit way? Well, Paul tells us in chapter 12 verse 7: "*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*" That's the key. True spiritual gifts always serve the common good. As Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*: "*Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it; everyone benefits.*"

That is to say, if a spiritual gift is work of the Holy Spirit then it points to the Spirit's interest in the common life of those it draws together. The Spirit is all about building up the group rather than enriching individuals.⁴

Rev. Mary Hinkle Shore points out: "*Whatever God's Spirit is doing, it will probably not be characterized by tidiness. When you are looking for the Spirit's gifts [working for the common good], look for a bit of a mess.*"⁵ Because the more people you have involved in something, the messier it is. Things are a lot cleaner when only one voice – a majority

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1338.

⁴ Shore, *ibid.*
⁵ Shore, *ibid.*

voice is heard. But the gospel message is not always clean. It is always clear. All voices matter. And the voices that aren't being heard – the ones not in the majority – matter most. Because if we don't make them matter more than the majority – we'll never hear them. This is why Jesus was always lifting up the least of these and inviting the shunned of the society to the table...because when people are not invited and included, their gifts aren't being used, and the community is not whole.

A good summary of Paul's views in 1 Corinthians 11 would be: How do we know if our gifts are rooted in the Spirit? Three things: 1) do they proclaim Jesus as Lord, 2) do they serve the common good, and 3) do they activate love for the neighbor.⁶

Discerning what your spiritual gift is not something I can do for you in a sermon. It is something this community can help you with if you are unsure how you are gifted to serve. Many of us, I suspect, know how we are gifted. Or at least have an inkling. Today – however – I want you to think of not the first things that come

to mind when you think of your gifts...but the gifts that you have that have perhaps been dormant for a while. Unused. Lots of us, I believe, have gifts we do not use...or gifts we don't even know we have.

Post-holiday season, it's not hard for us to think about all the gifts that go unused. Think of your kids' or grandkids' toys. They have so many that it's guaranteed at least a few of them will just sit on a shelf, unplayed with for a long, long time. Maybe until they've outgrown them and their donated. They're perfectly good toys...they're just not needed...they become invisible to the child because of all the other toys...lost in the crowd.

Or think of a gift card you've gotten – that's just sits in a drawer...for weeks, months, maybe even years. It's there...waiting to be spent. It's easy money – free money! But you just never make the time to go to that place. Or even worse – you go to that place all the time but always forget and leave the gift at home. So many chances to use it – and it's so easy to use...it's a no-brainer. And yet – we don't use it! My husband Damon works in the restaurant industry and he says

⁶ Shore, *ibid.*

15-20% of gift cards go unused. Which is great for businesses...not so much for consumers. But it's our fault! We just let free money sit there!

Or perhaps think of a jar of relish that just sits in your fridge that you got as a gift – it looks yummy and you even have a certain dish in mind for when you want to use it...you have every intention of using it...but gradually the weeks go by and it's unused and the next thing you know it's months later and you're cleaning out your fridge and you totally forgot you had it. It's spoiled. Expired.

Our spiritual gifts are not all that different. Perhaps we have a gift that we feel like we already see being used by others all around us and we feel it's not needed (i.e. the extra toy).

Or perhaps we have a gift that we know is valuable and we want to use it but we've shoved it away – out of sight, out of mind – and never made time for it or weren't intentional about using it (i.e. the gift card in the drawer).

Or perhaps we have a gift that we know we can use and the

time is now – we even have a purpose for our gift – it's a good match for what is needed in the world – and we keep thinking, tomorrow I'll do that, tomorrow I'll write that, tomorrow, I'll say that...and then...the time passes – the moment is gone. Expired.

So the first question that is asked of us in this text is: What is *your* gift? Maybe you have one you haven't used and you need to use it. Once you know what that is, the second question is: how are you using it *for the common good*?

As we see with Corinth, you can have a gift and use it to serve yourself. We all do this every day. It's how we survive. But do we want to survive, or do we want to thrive?

If we want to thrive – we must think beyond ourselves and to the community around us and outside of us. Survival will always pit us against others: my view vs. their view; my will vs. their will; my needs vs. their needs; my way or the highway. To survive is to stay alive. But to what end? To just keep surviving?

To thrive is to take a risk. To use the gifts and resources you have been uniquely given and

to use them for the common good. The common good of all people – yes, even people you disagree with or are skeptical about. They are people. We are all people. People gifted by the Spirit. And I think, like Paul, God is waiting on us to get our act together and start using our gifts for the common good. Will it be risky? Yes. But you see there's no shortage of resources. The shortage is our perspective...our willingness to risk something small for something big.

Can you say “Yes” to the gift/skill/talent God has given you (or the resources God has given you), and then say “And...” and allow God to fill in the blank...allow God to use your gift in a way for the common good that maybe you've never thought of before?

I have this theory that the work of God's kin-dom should always make people question our rationale and sanity. People may look at us and say, “*Have you lost your mind? That doesn't make any sense? That's not practical or fiscally responsible. Or what about THIS and THIS and THIS?*” We list all the problems before ever focusing on the fact that what we're doing is actually

could be a solution to a problem that God has uniquely called and gifted us to solve. People can question our rationale all they want as long as our motive is clear: is what we're doing loving God and loving other? At Calvary, we might ask: does this decision help us be more *Open to All Closed to None* – or does it close us off from others or exclude others?

The spiritual practices of *Passion* and *Humility* invite us engage the divisions of our lives and our country in a new way. We are to lean deeply into that which we are passionate about and to dig our heels in deeply in the soil of that for which we are gifted and called. Passion at its best is rooted in what God has gifted and called us to do and be.

And then, we keep that passion in check by making sure we lift up our heels sometimes and step outside of our passions on a regular basis (whether that be our passion of belief or action or cause) to hear and see and take in what others are passionate about. That is humility.

Humility does not mean that we begin to believe what others believe to keep our passions in

check; humility means we are always evaluating our passions in light of what we see and learn from others – and maybe that makes us more passionate for our cause, maybe it makes us take up a new cause, or maybe it makes us question our own motives or reasons for being so passionate about whatever it is we were so passionate about. Humility simply means that we don't walk away from uncomfortable conversations, we don't stop reading something we disagree with, we don't flip the channel when we don't like what we see (or hear).

This is a weekend charged with passion. Women's marches, pro life marches, the Marade, white teenagers staring down and mocking Native American elders, newscasters making racial slurs with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s name, Democrats and Republicans at a standstill over the border wall, the President and Congress at a standstill over the government shut down. And a lot of people – beloved children of God – are caught in the middle. Suffering. It makes you wonder if shouting louder and louder

will ever help us hear one another better. Will that humble us enough to hear one another? I don't know. But I've come to realize that is a privileged question. It is a question from someone who doesn't have to shout to have her voice heard. I understand now that some have to shout to get their voices heard. As Dr. King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:⁷

"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the

⁷ Letter accessed on 20 Jan. 2019 at http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html.

creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ."

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be.

Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime-- the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

Calvary – might we ask ourselves this question: are we extremists for Christ? For love? For a love that costs us something because it's more about others than ourselves?

As King once said to an audience in Montgomery, Alabama in 1957, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'"

Sounds a lot like Paul in 1 Corinthians, doesn't it?

What are you doing for others?

You have a gift. God has given you a gift. Use it. Don't let it be like that extra toy that sits on the shelf – unused – because you feel there are too many people out there using the gift you have. Any cause worth raising your voice for always needs more voices. Any action that shares love always needs more hands helping.

And don't let your gift be like a gift card that sits in a drawer. A gift that you know you have and that you know can offer – and you know it's worth something – but that you just never make time for it...it's just waiting, waiting, waiting unseen, unused. Out of sight, out of mind. And yet, like a gift card is free money, your gift could literally be the answer to someone's prayer – and it would literally cost you nothing --- if you'd only remember you had it and could use it.

And don't let your gift be like that jar of relish in the fridge. You know it's there and you keep meaning to use it tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day...and pretty soon other things get stacked in front of it and it's at the back of the fridge until it's too late. It's expired. The moment has passed. The moment that needed your gift is gone.

Rest assured, another moment will come. Another march will take place. Another injustice will call for an act of justice. Another racial slur will happen and will require you to speak up. Another person will pass you by hungry...and you'll have another opportunity to feed.

The point being – *whatever* your gift is – don't worry about whether or not it's good enough or the right gift to help make a difference in the world. Whether you are a loud protestor or a bread baker or an organizer or a quiet encourager or letter writer or a generous giver or a creative solutions offer-er or a listener or a storyteller...*your* gift is needed. Now. Today. As Paul writes, “*God's gifts are handed out everywhere, and they all originate in God's Spirit.*” Paul had an urgency in his tone with the Corinthians because he knew that the longer they delayed, the deeper their divisions would become.

YES, we all have gifts, AND we all are to use them for the common good, AND we are to them *now*.

I leave you with these words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King,

Jr. Again, from his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*:

I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has.

The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will.

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in

the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right...

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society...

Your gift can change the temperature of our culture. Our country. Our church. When used for the common good all of our gifts together can show the world that we are all from ONE SPIRIT.

God has given us the gifts. The time is NOW for us to use them. If not now, when?

Amen.

A LITANY FOR MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY

VOICES FROM THE STRUGGLE CELEBRATING THE WOMEN OF THE MOVEMENT⁸

On this Martin Luther King, Jr. Day weekend, we acknowledge that we have come a long way on the journey to justice for all people; and we acknowledge that a hard and long journey still remains.

We give thanks for all who have helped challenge and guide us thus far on the way, especially women. The struggle continues and their examples sustain us. Hear now their voices:

Pauli Murray: (Civil rights activist, lawyer, and Episcopal priest)

“Give me a song of hope and a world where I can sing it.”

Anne Braden: (Civil rights activist and journalist)

“Mass movements always come as the product of long years of mundane work by unsung

heroes, but no one can predict when the upsurge will crystallize. We cannot predict today when it will happen again. But as surely as I know that dawn will come tomorrow morning, I am convinced that it will happen.”

Fannie Lou Hamer: (Voting and women's rights activist and community organizer)

“There is one thing you have got to learn about our movement. Three people are better than no people. And....Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.”

Winona LaDuke: (Environmentalist, economist, and writer)

“Change will come. As always, it is just a matter of who determines what that change will be.”

Dolores Clara Fernández Huerta: (Labor leader and activist)

“Giving kids clothes and food is one thing, but it’s much more important to teach them that other people besides themselves are important, and that the best thing they can do

⁸Adapted from:
<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/mlk-resources.pdf>

with their lives is to use them in the service of other people.”

Yuri Kochiyama: (Japanese-American activist)

“If we want to change society, we must begin by transforming ourselves; learning from one another about one another’s history, culture, dreams, hopes, personal experiences. We must become one, for the future of humanity.”

Ella J. Baker: (Civil rights and human rights activist)

“The struggle is eternal. The tribe increases. Somebody else carries on.”

Nikki Giovanni: (Poet and professor)

“Today’s clouds can never deny yesterday’s beautiful sunset. The inconvenience of today’s storms can never turn us from tomorrow’s harvest. We plant, we reap, we try because we are human. We hope. We continue. Our soul is rested, but it will have to get up in the morning and start again.”

Rosa Parks: (Civil Rights activist)

“I have learned over the years that when one’s mind is made up, this diminishes fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear....and....Memories of our lives, of our works and our deeds will continue in others.”

Maya Angelou: (Activist, author, and poet)

“Love builds up the broken wall and straightens the crooked path. Love keeps the stars in the firmament and imposes rhythm on the ocean tides each of us is created of it and I suspect each of us was created for it.”

Mary McLeod Bethune: (Educator and civil rights activist)

“Faith is the first factor in a life devoted to service. Without it, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible.”