

Passions and Gifts

Romans 12:4-8; I Corinthians 12:4-7, 11; I Corinthians 13:1-3

Today let's think about Passion and Gifts. We have been discussing the passions of the church in one way or another in all our Sunday conversations: a ministering congregation, commitment to missions, hospitality, community, theological and spiritual curiosity and theological and spiritual freedom, and more. We may add some today.

But I want to focus my sermon on the second theme: Gifts. The Spiritual gifts we offer one another in the building up of the church and the spiritual gifts we offer the world.

I

In our texts for today from Romans and I Corinthians we get lists of spiritual gifts. They describe the gifts most important in those two first century communities, but spiritual gifts are not confined to these lists. Neither is the Spirit, who is always multiplying them. We might add the spiritual gifts of hospitality, friendship, encouragement, justice-making and mercy.

In Romans Paul calls these gifts *graces*, or *charismata*, gifts of the Spirit. We may get a little nervous with the topic of spiritual gifts. They can be the

occasion of spiritual pride, or you may think you have none. And what's the relationship of spiritual gifts and natural talents? *God is the giver of both!* Spiritual gifts are how God uses *you*. Spiritual gifts are all the gifts we've been given offered to God and others.

As Paul lists the graces, he mentions preaching (or prophecy), service, generous giving, teaching, leadership, and if you have the spiritual gift of acts of compassion, he says, for God's sake (and theirs) do them cheerfully!

What do you think your spiritual gifts are? Sometimes they are used inside the church, other times outside the church. Sometimes we call out these gifts in one another. Others can spot them sometimes better than we.

In our covenant we promise to support and encourage the gifts of one another. How best can we do this? How better can we do this? Especially among newer members who join not only to receive but who are eager to give. But also us longer-time members who may have hidden gifts longing to be expressed or new gifts for this time in your life.

II

In I Corinthians 12 Paul is teaching about spiritual gifts. He begins, in the old King James Version: "I would not have you ignorant, brothers." Commas are

important. One early uncorrected manuscript read: “I would not have you, ignorant brothers!” (Some of you may like that version better!)

Because speaking in ecstatic tongues was practiced in Corinth, he has some special instruction about that gift. Every church has within its members a unique set of gifts. The Corinthian church, as the Pentecostal church, emphasized speaking in tongues. What are ours at Grace?

But there were more! Paul categorizes the spiritual gifts in three groupings, but again the Holy Spirit cannot be confined to our classifications!

The *charismata*, or spiritual gifts were:

- 1) the gifts of speaking and knowledge: preaching, teaching, ecstatic tongues and interpretation of tongues in worship.
- 2) the gifts of spiritual power and healing: signs and wonders, working miracles, healing prayer. And,
- 3) the gifts of service: acts of compassion and kindness, serving the needs of others, servant-leadership.

And then he ends the chapter by launching into the next, the famous “love chapter.” All these, he says, are important gifts, but let me tell you about the greatest. And as he begins he brings back the categories of gifts, speech, signs and miracles, service:

- If I speak in the eloquence of human tongues or in ecstatic tongues of the Spirit and have not love, I am a noisy gong or clanging cymbal.
- And if I have the gifts of preaching and teaching and understand all mysteries and knowledge but have not love I am nothing.
- If I have the faith to move mountains and heal but have not love, I am nothing.
- And if I give away even my own body to be burned and have not love, I gain nothing!

Love is the greatest of the gifts, love is the indispensable measure of the gifts. All gifts flow from love, and if they are not expressions of love, they are nothing.

As Emily Dickinson put it:

That love is all there is,
is all we know of love.

IV

So what about your gifts and mine? Is there a gift you are longing to offer this community? The world?

A noted writer and speaker about “community” is Peter Block. His most noted book has the title: “The Structure of Belonging.” (Beautiful title.)

He leads organizations to deepen their belonging in community. He says we need to have five conversations, which he leads with sets of questions:

- The Possibility Conversation—moving from problems to possibilities.
- The Ownership Conversation—moving from blame to participation.
- The Dissent Conversation—how to listen to dissent in community.
- The Commitment Conversation—what promises am I willing to make?
- And the Gifts Conversation—moving gifts from the margin to the center.

Two of the questions in the Gifts Conversation are moving to me:

“What is the gift you hold in exile?” And,

“What is something about you that no one knows?”

Questions like these invite us into the discovery and encouragement of gifts.