

January 16, 2022 - Morning Worship at Central United Church

Debz Ferber



An Abundance of Gifts

In Shakespeare's famous play "Twelfth Night" he pens a timeless line, "do not be afraid of greatness. Some are born great. Some achieve greatness. And others have greatness thrust upon them."

The desire to know and to be known are embedded in the human experience, in fact it is said that Jesus's temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-17 speaks to the three greatest human desires that exist in pretty much all of us. The temptation to be relevant (turning stones into bread), the temptation to prove our value and worth (throwing himself off the temple), and the temptation for riches, fortune, and fame (bowing to Satan in order to receive the earthly kingdom).

Most of us desire to know that we have made a difference, most of us spend our lives seeking after a passion that will help define our existence, and most of us want to know that we are living for something or someone beyond just ourselves.

In the passage we read today from 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, the Apostle Paul shows us how we are all different and yet we are all serving the same body of Christ - or the same church. Here Paul lays out several different spiritual gifts which one can possess, some of them are still common in our time, and others are not as common unless you come from a charismatic or Pentecostal background. The gifts Paul lays out here are: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophesy, distinguishing spirits, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. There are other similar spiritual gifts lists found in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Peter 4:10-11 for a total of 20 specific gifts the Bible talks about believers being granted. The other lists include the gifts of teaching, serving, encouragement, generosity, leadership, mercy, and preaching. While some gifts are very much public roles, there are many others which are quietly done behind the scene but which still carry the weight with them of Kingdom impact.

This morning, I read a different version of these gifts from a liturgy called "Enfleshed." This is what the author writes, "In today's lectionary Scripture, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 is proclaimed, 'To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' For the sake of common good. For collective liberation. For the sake of un-building empire and co-creating otherwise. For the purpose of love's freeing work. For material transformation, intimately, structurally, and commonly.

To one, the Spirit gives discerning wisdom and to another, the strength to weep for all that is being lost. To another, an unshakable belief in the potential of transformation, to another, a soft presence that holds space for healing. To another, a fire that inspires and compels. To another, the courage to name and to unveil. To another, humour that upholds us. To another, a curiosity that bridges, to another still, the gift of telling stories - ancient, fresh, intimate, and collective."

Many of us might have been told at some point in our life perhaps by a friend, colleague, boss, or family member that we are specifically gifted in a certain area. Perhaps we are good at extending hospitality - cooking and hosting a meal, making others feel welcome, and making sure that others feel included and valued. Perhaps we are specifically gifted in service - we are willing to do the important jobs which others overlook and which might never be acknowledged, but perhaps we still

take pride in knowing that someone completed them. Perhaps we are good at working with children, being thoughtful as we remember the shut-ins, or good at writing thoughtful cards that cheer someone up.

These are all gifts the Bible specifically addresses, and yet in my sermon preparation I remembered that there are many other gifts which the Bible doesn't talk about but which to me are priceless. I think about the biweekly United Church Young Adult's group I am part of with 18-35 year olds from across Canada and I think of their gifts of bravery, vulnerability, honesty, and compassion as they freely share about their lives. I think about the gift of advocacy and justice many within the United Church carry as they pour their life work into social justice causes. I think of the gifts of creativity that artists, musicians, writers, poets, film makers, and board game designers possess. It is exactly because of the gift of artistic expression that many of us have been able to manage through various lockdowns. I also think of those who are creative problem solvers, visionaries, bridge-builders, and those who have the gift of wondering and questioning how to make things better for the future. I think about the people I work with who are coming out of homelessness and their gifts of courage, of trust, and of belief even when moments seem bleak and hopeless.

Since we are now entering the week of prayer for Christian unity, I also have been thinking of the gifts that other denominations and even other religions can bring to us. While many of us here grew up in the church, we now live in such a multi-cultural world where there are people of all backgrounds, beliefs, and persuasions. In Windsor alone we have Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Baptist, Brethren, Byzantine, and Orthodox churches. We also have Muslims, Jews, Atheists, Hindus, Buddhists, and a host of other spiritual identities. Each one, and each person has something to bring. The way we worship, our core theology, and our social structures might vastly differ, but beneath it all many of us are still searching for love, for acceptance, and for a spiritual community. To me, being ecumenical or inter-faith does not mean that we have to be exactly like someone else or that we must purely focus on the similarities, though. We can acknowledge the differences, but we can also remember that there is often rich beauty in diversity.

Additionally, I think about those whose gift is often not considered. What is the child who is non-verbal and who has a developmental disability trying to teach and show us? Can it be through the gift of slowing down, of friendship, of trust, and of deep listening even when words are not expressed? Could the person suffering from drug or alcohol addiction really be giving us the gift of being able to reach out and speak to them at the heart level, of acknowledging their trauma rather than their perceived vulnerability? Could the immigrant from another country whose accent we can barely understand or who might not even speak English, be giving us the gift of experiencing a new lifestyle, a new perspective, and learning a new definition for home?

Every week, we literally bump into hundreds of people. Even with the restrictions, we still see people at the grocery store, walking past our street, driving to work, sitting on the street corner asking for money, on our social media, and in our churches. I'm wondering if when we see these people, we can stop and actually see them as beloved children of God. I'm wondering if we can consider what the person can teach us - even if it's just patience because they are taking so long to count out their change. I'm also wondering what gifts we can give to help that person, what lessons we can teach them.

Sometimes we may feel like we have nothing to give or to offer, but even in those moments of pain, we can remember that we are always a few pages ahead of someone else in our story. There is always someone who we can help and often in those moments when we are depressed, disillusioned, or distressed, being able to help someone else takes our minds off of our own reality.

Yes, God has given each one of us unique gifts, but it's all for the exact same purpose. Regardless of what our gift might be, we were given it to remember who God is and to show others about Him, to build up the church, and to help equip and empower others. There will be times when we feel anything but great on our journey, there are times when we might even feel taken advantage of or

burnt-out, but Paul reminds us in Galatians 6:9 that we should “not become weary of doing good for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” A statistic I came across once said that the average person will influence 1,000 people in their lifetime. At first this may seem like a lot of people, but just think about how many people you have met already in your life. There are even people that we are able to influence without ever meeting them because of our prayers for them, or because a friend of ours tells them a story about us. Since we have no idea how many people we will impact, I want to encourage us to impact them through our gifting. Through our smiles, our sharing, and our loving-kindness.

Shakespeare once wrote not to be afraid of this greatness - of these gifts. Not to shy away from them, but to use them for good. He wrote that not all understand greatness. That there will be people who aren't happy with what we do, don't stay where you are merely tolerated, go where you will be celebrated. Give of yourself to the people who will see that value and be grateful. Some are born great - some have an inherent and natural ability to do something almost as if it were genetic. Some achieve greatness - some are able to develop a skill or ability because they spend time practicing and working towards it. And some have greatness thrust upon them - some find themselves in a position where they must use their gift to help others whether they feel the gift is fully developed or not.

Regardless of where you are today, regardless of how small and insignificant you might think your gift is, and regardless of how underdeveloped you might feel your gift is, I encourage you to shine. I encourage us to claim the gifts we know we have - we do not have to pretend they don't exist, but we can actually say “yes, God has given me this talent” and then we can seek out a way to use it to support others.

I hope and pray that in this coming week our eyes will be open to such possibilities, because they are always there and they always exist.

May it be so. Amen.