

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 20, 2019  
Second Sunday after Epiphany  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 62:1-5  
Psalm 96  
I Corinthians 12:1-11  
John 2:1-11

I want to begin this morning with a question: How do we know that Epworth Chapel on the Green is not just a social club, a place where people with a penchant for English-flavored Christianity like to gather each week for tea and refreshments?

What makes Epworth different from the Kiwanis Club, or the Rotary Club, or the Toastmasters?

Well, no doubt those organizations are full of wonderful people doing wonderful things for their communities.

But one of the distinguishing features of the local church, according to the apostle Paul, is this: The local church is an organism where God has given each person a special measure of grace -- Paul calls it a “charism” -- a spiritual gift (or gifts) in accord with our individual personality and make-up.

We will examine why God has given believers spiritual gifts momentarily, but we should note first that the church at Corinth was misguided about the

working of God's gifts in its midst, and so Paul needed to write to correct those misunderstandings.

The Corinthians were viewing the possession of certain spiritual gifts as a reason for pride and were setting believers against one another based on who had which gift.

Our epistle lesson today begins a three chapter unit where Paul teaches in detail about the spiritual gifts and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. And while I'm not prone to preach from an outline, Paul's words can help our understanding of the spiritual gifts if we think in terms of a threefold emphasis: their *source*, their *nature*, and their *purpose*.

***I. The Source of the spiritual gifts.*** Paul makes it clear right from the beginning that the source of the gifts and graces in our lives is the Holy Spirit. This is part of what Paul means when he says that "no one is able to say that 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (v. 3).

There were some who were teaching that only a select group of persons with special insight and "wisdom" were gifted by the Spirit. Paul refutes this. All believers are gifted with the Holy Spirit, says Paul, because it is only by the Spirit that authentic confession of faith in Jesus is possible.

The Spirit, then, is the possession of every Christian, not just a select few. And it is that same Spirit who gives every Christian believer gifts which are to be used in service of Christ and the Church.

Let me remind you of some good news this morning. If you are a believer and Jesus Christ is the Lord of your life, then the Holy Spirit is present and active in your life. And the Spirit has blessed you with grace, with gifts that are unique to you.

There is a vitality, an energy, a force present in your gifts, and because there is only one of you in all time, the expression of those gifts through your life is a completely unique expression that won't come any other way. Your gifts are the unique ways that Jesus wants to be Jesus *through you*.

There is only one of you. And the world is in desperate need of what God has to offer it through *your life*. Your job is not to compare yourself to others, but to keep your life open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Resist the temptation to spend your time pondering your inadequacies or being envious of others, and open yourself instead to the work God is doing in your life.

***II. The Nature of the Spiritual Gifts.*** Paul tells us two things about the nature of the spiritual gifts. First, they are diverse. The list Paul cites here is nowhere near exhaustive. Other lists appear elsewhere in the New Testament.

The gifts are diverse and many, but secondly, they are also *equal*. They do not come in a hierarchy or in some sort of descending order. Paul makes this clear by his use of the metaphor of the church as a body. The body consists of many and various parts with many and diverse functions, but you don't make a whole body out of one part.

In addition to Michael Robinett, there are others of us in the congregation who are (or were) trumpet players.

I don't know about the others, but there was a time when I was in high school when I believed that the trumpet was the most important instrument in the band. The trumpet is powerful. It is majestic.

Think about it. When the walls of Jericho came tumbling down, it wasn't with flutes, or clarinets, or saxophones, or even trombones. No. It was with *trumpets*.

I remember times when our high school band would be rehearsing, and our teacher would stop us and say: "Trumpets, I like what you're doing, but I cannot hear the flutes and clarinets." And I would think to myself: "Yeah...so what?"

But the truth is that for any piece of music, whether played by an orchestra, a marching band, or a small jazz combo, the audience needs to hear all the instruments. The great trumpet player and composer Wynton Marsalis once said: "In jazz, if you can't hear the bass, you're playing too loud."

This is what the apostle Paul is telling the church at Corinth. All of the spiritual gifts of all of God's people must work together in harmony for the common good. No one gift is better than another. For God's music to be played, all of the instruments must be heard – and they must play in harmony.

In fact, spiritual gifts are not designed to draw attention to those who have them but to the one Spirit who *gives* them. They demonstrate the power of God so that those who witness them will be able to say “God is really at work among you.” Or, to stay with our music metaphor, people ought to be able to look at our church (or any church) and say: “My, what beautiful music they play together.”

***III. The Purpose of the Spiritual Gifts.*** The Holy Spirit is the *source* of our gifts, and those gifts are both *diverse* and *equal*. And they are given to us to achieve a twofold purpose.

The first purpose the gifts serve is to promote *unity* in the Church. Your spiritual gift is not given to you for your own personal benefit. It is given to you for the purpose of serving Christ and those he loves.

In addition, your gifts are not given to you so that you might attract a following or become famous. Your gifts are given to you so that the Church might be edified and built up, so that brothers and sisters in the faith might be strengthened in their faith and be inspired to become better than they are.

But in addition to unity, the gifts serve another purpose -- that of *ministry*. The Holy Spirit has given us gifts so that we might show forth Jesus to the world, so that we might be an ongoing “epiphany” of Christ to others. To repeat: Your gifts are the unique ways that Jesus wants to be Jesus, *through you!*

And behind this great diversity of gifts there is the one God who gives them. Behind the unique and quirky personalities of God’s people is the one Lord whom they serve. Behind the many different ways of service in the Church is the one Spirit who orchestrates that service.

God may have given you grace to lay your hands on people and heal them. To someone else God may give the gift of discernment. To another God may give the gift of prophecy. To others God may give what Paul calls the *diakonia*, or acts of labor and service. Others may have gifts of teaching.

But this much we know. God has given us these gifts so that the Church may grow *in* Christ and the world may know *of* Christ. He has given us these gifts so that we may be one, and in our unity we may be a powerful witness to the world.

Now, all of this talk of the spiritual gifts is wonderful. You can talk to a friend today and if they say, “How was church?” you can say: “Our pastor gave a nice talk on the spiritual gifts.”

But think about it. What is the best way to handle a gift? What is the best thing we can do with any meaningful gift?

The best thing that can happen to a gift is for it to be *unwrapped and used*. Right? Talk about the spiritual gifts is wonderful. But even more wonderful is that they be unwrapped in our lives and used for the glory of God and the benefit of others.

As we come to the Table this morning, I invite you to come with gratitude to God for the gifts and graces he has given you. And I invite you to open yourself anew to the ways in which God wants to use your life to bless others.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.