

Are You Gifted?

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Corinthians 12: 12-31

Delivered on January 27, 2018 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

Ted was someone who served on the Session with me. He was what you might call a curmudgeon. He was grumpy. He didn't like anything we did at the church; he didn't like many people in the church. He was one of those guys in the session who always grumbled whenever the church had to spend five bucks to do anything. I thought it was probably best not to ask Ted to do too much of anything if I didn't have to. But one day I had a problem. A Sunday came when we were to send a couple of the youth on a mission trip somewhere and I thought it best to have an elder to do the commissioning prayer, you know the prayer to ask God's blessings upon them as they go on their way. Except, we got five minutes into the service, and the elder I asked to do it wasn't there. "Well, that's ok" I said to myself, "who isn't five minutes late to church every once in a while?" Ten minutes, the elder still wasn't there. Twenty minutes, and I could wait no longer, it was time to do the prayer. So with the greatest reluctance, I grabbed Ted and asked him to do it. So he got up, and I was afraid of what was going to come out of Ted's mouth, but that's when I discovered that not only could Ted pray, he could pray on demand, he could pray in poetry on demand. Out of Ted's mouth like a gentle stream flowed Shakespeare, Robert Frost and William Blake all rolled into one. It was without exaggeration the most moving prayer I had ever heard. Who knew?

There was another time, another time when I was doing a funeral for a woman who was 93. She had her funeral all planned out and left specific instructions for how it would be done. Most of her instructions were like any instructions you would find at a funeral. She wanted some nice uplifting scripture readings, mostly about the resurrection, she had some personal

stories she wanted to share. And she wanted her twin sister Nancy to sing a solo of Amazing Grace. There was only one problem. Nancy was almost completely blind, almost completely deaf and her cognitive decline was pretty advanced. She had no short-term memory at all, and very little long term memory. I wasn't sure that Nancy could remember the words to Amazing Grace, or if I could even make a copy of the words large enough so that she could read them. But with some assistance, Nancy got up to the microphone on the pulpit, and she belted out every word to this beloved hymn and she did so with a voice sweet enough to make the angels jealous. And, I might add, she didn't even need the words. Again, who knew?

I want to tell you a third story. This takes place before I was a pastor but it was when I was an intern at a church in Atlanta. His name was Darryl, and he was the most misbehaved kid you ever saw in a youth group. He was a bully, and he would bully the other kids in the youth group. When I was at my wits end with Darryl, I am ashamed to say that I was one of those who said to the pastor of that church that we should take the drastic step of asking Darryl to leave the group and not come back. The pastor, Belinda was her name, said "I have a better idea." Holy Week was coming up and the kids were putting on a passion play. Belinda would ask Darryl to play Jesus. "Oh, good heavens, what an awful idea!" everyone said. We could all see Darryl playing Judas or even Pontius Pilate, but Jesus, he was less like Jesus than anyone else in the church. And then we said, "Darryl will make a joke of the whole thing." But Belinda said, "No he won't." She was right. He didn't. Darryl in fact, never expected to be asked to do such a thing. And he was grateful. He knew he was a rough kid and he didn't know what he did to deserve such an honor. He decided he would take the role seriously. And as he was practicing for the role of Jesus, something else happened to him. Darryl began to understand what Jesus did for

him on the cross. He began to see everything from Jesus' point of view. And some weeks later, he told Belinda he wanted to be baptized and give his life to the Lord. Sometime after that, Darryl got up in front of the congregation and told his story, and there wasn't a dry eye in the congregation. Darryl later went on to become a preacher, and I am told he preaches an amazing sermon. Again, who knew?

These are just some of the ways God's gifts among people in the church have surprised me. And I have seen God's gifts among black people, white people, brown people, red and yellow people. I have seen them among the young and old, among men and women. I have seen them among Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans. I have seen them everywhere.

In our New Testament lesson today, the apostle Paul uses an image for the church which any of you who go to church regularly have surely heard before. He uses the image of a body. And this is the standard passage that is read out of the New Testament whenever we ordain and install a new class of elders in the church, or a class of deacons if we were to have deacons, or whenever we ordain someone to the ministry, because as some people will tell you, it reminds us that in the church we have different functions, just as a body has eyes with the function of seeing or ears with the function of hearing, or a mouth with the function of speaking, which unfortunately for me, is a function that is probably overused.

But despite how we may use this passage, Paul is not talking about any particular way of organizing the church. He is talking about the whole church when he talks about the body, and he talks about building up the church or the body with the gifts of God, as he talks about the gift of healing, the gift of prophecy, the gift of tongues, the gift of miracles. Now, I have to admit to you that I have not really seen many of these gifts that Paul talks about at work in the

church. I have never seen anyone work a miracle in the church by turning water into wine or turning stone into bread. I have never seen anyone speak in tongues although I have heard about that many times. And I have never seen anyone heal someone with their bare hands. But while Paul's particular list of gifts sounds strange to me, I don't have any doubt that God pours out his gifts on the church for the building up of the body. That is something I have seen with my own eyes. It is something I've seen with my own eyes even when I wasn't looking for it.

Today, we are ordaining Jared and installing him along with Jeff, Lynda, and Jim to the office of elder. For their part, Jeff and Jim are serving on the Session as elders already, but they have been re-elected and so we are installing them for a new term. And this is a very Presbyterian thing to do. So, it seems fitting that we have a very Presbyterian sermon. The word Presbyterian, in fact, *means* elders. You won't find elders in Methodists or Baptist or Catholic churches. And I want you all to know that I believe in what we are doing every time we ordain and install a new class of elders. I believe in our system of government. Your pastor is a fourth generation Presbyterian baptized in the largest Presbyterian church in the country, by Frank Harrington, who was Mr. Presbyterian if anyone was. Your pastor is so Presbyterian in fact, that he was shocked, shocked when he got old enough to read the bible on his own and found out that John Calvin and John Knox were not two of Jesus' original disciples.

But as much as I love our way of doing things in the Presbyterian church, today is not really about the importance of the Presbyterian office of elder. It is about the importance of God's gifts. And today as we ordain and install these four elders we do so, because we see in them the gifts of leadership, spiritual maturity, and wisdom. And these gifts are from God for the building up of the whole church. And because being an elder is about your gifts from God, I want to tell

the four of you something that a lot of people don't understand. Because being an elder is about your giftedness from God, you are an elder for life, even when you are off the Session, even when you are not performing the functions of an elder, and governing us in that very Presbyterian way. Your ordination is bigger than who we are as Presbyterians. It is about the gracious God who is bigger than any of us and who is the God of all Christians and indeed even all creation.

In my training for our new class of elders, I talked to them a little about why we happen to believe that the Presbyterian way of organizing the church is the best way of organizing the church and the most biblical way of organizing the church. Those were my words and it is honestly my opinion. But if the truth be told, there are all kinds of ways of organizing the church. There are churches with deacons and without them, there are churches with elders and without them, and there are churches with ordained ministers and without them. I'll say it again. There are all kinds of ways of organizing the church. But you will never find a church without God's gifts at work among his people. That is what this day is all about.

For the rest of you, you may say to me this morning that you are all for celebrating the gifts of these four who are being ordained and installed, and you are all for celebrating the gifts of other people in the church, but you are pretty sure that you aren't gifted in any special way. Well, apart from promising you that that isn't true, I don't know how to convince you that you are gifted if you are sure that you're not. But maybe it would help to know that while you cannot fail to be gifted by God, what we can do in the church is fail to recognize your gifts. We can fail to honor them and to celebrate them. That happened to no one less than Paul himself. Paul talks about how on his missionary journeys to churches like the one in Corinth that

congregations were not impressed with him when they met him face to face. They would say things like “his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.” So do not think that just because your gifts have not been properly celebrated that you are not gifted.

As for the four of you, Jim, Jeff, Lynda, and Jared, my prayer is that we as a church would always celebrate your gifts of leadership as we are doing today, and that you, in return would remember to use these gifts for promoting Christ’s church, not just here at Northminster, and not just among our fellow Presbyterians, but wherever you may find the church.