

May 15, 2005
Numbers 11:24-30, I Corinthians 12:1-13
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"Spiritual Gifts"

In his book *His Excellency George Washington*, historian Joseph Ellis states that Washington “surrounded himself with the most intellectually sophisticated collection of statesmen in American presidential history.” (p. 198) Washington selected James Madison, who would draft what came to be known as the Bill of Rights, to be his chief consultant on political appointments and congressional matters. He chose Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, to be his Secretary of State. He selected the brilliant Alexander Hamilton to bring about banking and fiscal reform as Secretary of the Treasury. They joined other talented leaders like Henry Knox, John Jay and Edmund Randolph in charting a new course for our nation. Although, in time, there would be sharp disagreements and bitter disputes among these founders, they worked together during Washington’s first term to shape the political, economic and cultural life of our nation. They used their diverse gifts for the common good.

In the church, we recognize that God has given us many talents for ministry. The talents we have are the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit formed the church on the day of Pentecost and gave timid disciples gifts they didn’t know they had. On Pentecost, the disciples gathered together for prayer. Suddenly the sound of a great wind filled the room and the tongues of fire rested on each disciple. These unschooled disciples proclaimed the gospel so that Jews from all across the Roman empire heard the gospel in their native tongues. The Holy Spirit continued to empower the church with gifts of healing, teaching, compassion, preaching, love, wisdom and administration. Frightened disciples became bold witnesses for Jesus. They used their gifts for the good of all in order to build up the body of Christ.

In the letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminds us that God has given to each one of us gifts for ministry. We do not all have same gifts. We are not all called to do the same thing. As prideful, self-focused human beings, we tend to consider some gifts as more important than others. Paul reminds us that each gift is essential to the healthy functioning of the whole. Indeed, we are to give special honor to those gifts that the world may consider less important or less valuable. Each one of us can think of someone who has made life better for others because of the quiet and faithful service that person renders without seeking recognition or honor. I remember a retired businesswoman in another church who joined our congregation late in life. She would not have wanted to serve on a committee, be an officer or teach a class. Yet, each week she came early on Wednesday evenings before our weekly fellowship supper to get everyone’s nametag in alphabetical order and ready to pick up. I remember a retired postal worker in still another church who chopped up, bundled and sold kindling all winter long. He gave all the proceeds to the Presbyterian Home in Virginia for children and youth with special needs. I remember a woman in a country

church who typed and ran the bulletin each week. I remember a woman who volunteered her time one night a week all winter long to serve as a host at the homeless shelter. I remember another man who taught the four year olds for over 20 years. He often said that God never made anything more wonderful than a four-year-old. It is easy to undervalue these gifts and to forget just how much the holy presence of God inhabits the ordinary moments and experiences of life. We forget how simple things like rocking a baby, preparing a meal, working on a drawing of a ventilation shaft or planting a tree can convey the extraordinary grace of God.

Sometimes it is hard to know what our true gifts may be. The Stewardship Ministry Team of our church is hosting a Life Keys workshop on Friday and Saturday, June 3 and 4. The purpose of the Life Keys program is to help us know who we are, what spiritual gifts God has given us, and how we can use those gifts to make a difference in our homes, our church, our professions and our community. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that we don't have any special gifts or talents. As I read the scriptures, I see that God has given each one of us a unique personality, diverse talents and special opportunities to serve. It has always been a goal of my ministry to encourage every member of the congregation to use their gifts for ministry by being engaged in one helping relationship outside their normal circle of family and friends. There are some things that only you can do because of who you are, where you are and what abilities God has given you. Joy comes when we use our special gifts where they are needed most.

Sometimes we forget why God has given us these abilities and resources. In Corinthians, we read that God has given us gifts to use for the common good in order to build up the body of Christ. Paul says that there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit gives them all. The one Spirit calls us to work and serve together. Like the founders of our nation, it is all too easy to let ego get in the way of service, to let pride overwhelm gratitude and to let greed destroy the spirit of generosity. We can become so focused on being right and getting our way that we forget that there are other viewpoints to consider and other people's needs to meet.

In the book of Numbers we hear how Moses was overwhelmed with the responsibility of providing for the needs of the people. God told Moses to select 70 elders from among the people to provide for the people. God took some of the same Spirit he had given to Moses and gave the Spirit to the elders. The Spirit also fell on two men, Eldad and Medad, who remained in the camp outside the tent. Joshua urged Moses to stop them, but Moses affirmed the gifts of God in the two men and declared his desire that all of God's people would be filled with the Spirit. Moses understood that each person has a gift to give. Rather than being jealous of the gifts of others, we need to encourage the ministry of others.

Paul is quick to chide the church for missing the mark. The gifts of the Spirit, which should unite the church and empower the church, can become a source of tension and conflict in the church. We have all known people who in the name of Jesus have a special talent for meddling, for turning things inside out and upside down, and

bringing division to the body of Christ. The true test is whether not our gifts serve the good of all and to build up the body of Christ.

Wendell Berry's poetic novel *Jayber Crow* tells the story of a man who becomes the town barber and spends his years as a keen observer of the lives of the people in a small settlement called Port William. You might say that observing life was Jayber Crow's gift. He observes the very different approaches that a farmer named Athey Keith and his son-in-law Troy Chatham have brought to life and to farming. Jayber sees that his friend the old farmer "Athey was not exactly, or not only what is called a 'landowner.' He was the farm's farmer, but also its creature and belonging. He lived its life, and it lived his; he knew that, of the two lives, his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter." (p. 182). His son-in-law, Troy "thought the farm existed to serve and to enlarge him." Both men had gifts for farming. Only Athey lived in harmony with the land, rotated his crops and livestock. He understood that as a farmer he was to contribute not only to his family's simple needs, but also to the good of the land he loved. Troy used his gifts to modernize the farm, buy a tractor, rent more land, work harder, wear out the land, get into debt and eventually neglect his family. One remembered the good beyond his own his needs; the other thought only of satisfying his insatiable hunger and boundless desire. One used his gifts in harmony with the world; the other used his gifts to serve himself alone.

On this Pentecost Sunday, we celebrate the gifts of the Spirit among us and within us. God has given each one of us special gifts to use. Everyone has a gift. Let us not despise our gifts or envy the gifts of others. No honest labor, however humble, is without value in God's kingdom. The true test of our Christian life is whether or not we use these gifts God has given us for the common good and to build up the body of Christ.