

July 8, 2007
Ephesians 4:1-16
Rev. Kenneth C. Green

“Unwrap the Gift”

Are you a gift-peeker? Do you know any gift-peekers? You know what I’m talking about. Weeks before your birthdays some of you begin strolling around the house looking under furniture and inside closets you don’t usually use. When my brother-in-law was a teenager anticipating Christmas, he would begin nosing around his parent’s house well before Thanksgiving, looking for boxes that were new, shopping bags with mysterious contents—especially the ones that were taped closed—or the ones that said “No Peeking!”, yes, that means YOU!!” on the outside. Or maybe you’re the kind of person that doesn’t want to ruin the surprise. Maybe you don’t even want to ruin the beautiful wrapping preferring to gaze at the bright colors and shiny ribbons and imagine what treasures could be hidden inside.

During a summer mission stint after college, I lived with an old widow in South Central Los Angeles. Sister Horner was a gracious host and a formidable presence in her long dress and broad-brimmed hat when she walked into Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church on Sundays. My parents had sent with me a gift for her which I had to convince her to open. It was only a box of candy, but I had to cajole her into opening the box and actually tasting them. She wanted to just look at the box and enjoy the beautiful wrapping! “Unwrap the gift!” I teased, “It tastes even better than it looks!”

I’m not here to cast judgment on your gift opening style, but let’s admit that the purpose of most gifts, at least in the mind of the giver, is for them to be opened at the appropriate time, season or event, and to be enjoyed and hopefully even used regularly by the recipient. Kids can be good models for us in this regard. Picture the last time you saw a child tear into a gift-wrapped package with enthusiasm and abandon. Do you remember the urgency with which the opening was accomplished—or at least attempted? The child knew that whatever it was, was worth getting to...and NOW!

Gifts suggest some planning. Ideally, gifts are evidence of your knowledge of the recipient and his or her needs, tastes and wishes. Our New Testament passage today mentions one gift and then several gifts and it’s a bit confusing to whom or to what the terms are referring. Let’s break it out: The initial gift given to the church by Jesus is the Holy Spirit. Then other gifts are given to the church through the Spirit. The gift keeps giving.

In verse seven we read “each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” This mention of a singular gift refers to the Holy Spirit. Both in his gospel and at the beginning of Acts, Luke describes our Lord instructing the disciples to wait for the gift of the Holy Spirit before going on to do ministry in Jesus’ name. The Holy Spirit is Christ’s gift to the church and through the Spirit, we’re given the gifts listed in verse 11: people who fulfill particular functions in the life of the church—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

The first of these roles had a very particular meaning to the recipients of this letter. Apostles were the “sent ones” who’d worked closely with Jesus, and seen the risen Lord—so that would be a pretty specific group.

Prophets would be those with the gift of prophesy—one of the gifts of the Spirit listed in Corinthians as well. But as our Old Testament passage suggests, that gift can be poured out widely. Anyone who speaks God’s truth,

especially when it runs counter to cultural norms may be exercising this gift.

What about Evangelists? Are they a gift? Certainly some of you have this gift though you might not use the label “evangelist.” It has come to carry negative connotations in a culture inundated by cable television, and certainly some of those who’ve made headlines in the last couple of decades have contributed to that. But those who have the gift of evangelism are able to present the good news of the gospel to others in a way that is winsome and effective.

For the Ephesians, Teachers might have been itinerant or local folks who taught others about the faith. None of the teachers in the churches in Ephesus had their M.Div. or D.Min.s. They were people of faith who worked to teach and train others in that faith.

Pastors, in some translations this says “elders,” but the term was used to describe those who cared for a particular body of believers, usually a house church. Some of you who are in reunion groups or other committed small groups, and serve to coordinate, facilitate or even shepherd that group are serving in that role. It also refers to those who fill the pastoral role officially. Has it occurred to you that:

8:15 Karen—(and Lewis and Joan—) are gifts to you?

9:30 Ray, David and Tassie—(and Lewis and Joan) are gifts to you?

11:00 Joyce and Bob—(and Lewis and Joan) are gifts to you?

So were Bill Enright, Richard Armstrong, William Hudnut, Jean Milner and others back to Henry Ward Beecher. So were all those who served as Associate Pastors along the way: Ray Bowden, Tom Walker, Jim Miller, Tom Dickleman and many others.

I trust that I have been a gift to you as well, but note that these gifts all have a single purpose. These gifts were not intended to be displayed decoratively, like those empty little gift-wrapped boxes sometimes used as ornaments on Christmas trees. Nor were they meant to be taped, digitally recorded, or down-loaded for your entertainment or distraction. Each of these gifts was intended to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.”

Are the gifts included merely a list of religious occupations? Not exclusively. For example, “teachers of the faith” are often not officially “religious” people, that is, those who have taken ordination vows, but everyday folks like Anne Floeck and Ann Schiel, Diane Orians, and Deb Leithauser and all those who help Betty Salwak and Allison Berlier teach and care for the children in Sunday School; and Britt Stemme and Jennifer Dennison and the crew who put on VBS. These folks are living out the vows they took at their own baptism or confirmation as well as the promises they made as members of this congregation during baptisms like the ones we just witnessed.

I mentioned good gift-giving shows some knowledge of the recipient. God knows us and gifts us with what God knows we can use to give God glory and to build up the body of Christ. Not necessarily the gifts we find desirable, or even those we think we’d best use. God wants us to unwrap the gifts we’ve been given with the help of the Holy Spirit in the context of Christian community. Unwrap the gift!

Perhaps you don’t see yourself in any of those roles. Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and Teachers. You might be saying, “I’m not the subject of that text.” OK, but we are all the objects of it. Remember the purpose of the gifts? To “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” And we are all saints or could become saints. The Bible describes all believers in Jesus, the Christ—the anointed Son of the Father—as saints. No papal edict necessary. And what are we saints to be doing? “The work of ministry;” this is part of a central tenant of our reformed

theological heritage—“the priesthood of all believers.” We all are called to be at the work of ministry—building up the body of Christ.

One of my pastor friends reported encouraging members to become involved in ministry opportunities in his church, only to hear the response: “That’s what we pay you to do!” Those folks don’t get what it means to be Presbyterian—they’re missing the “priesthood of all believers” but they also are missing the clear message of our Ephesians text this morning. The pastor’s job isn’t to “do ministry” but to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” It’s a lot like coaching in this regard.

Think of the Colts this last year. Dwight Freeney and Kato June creating havoc with opposing offenses; Peyton Manning calling audibles, throwing passes, and making TV commercials; Marvin Harrison and Reggie Wayne keeping defenses honest, keeping the defensive backs deep in coverage and opening up the running game for Joseph Addai.

Then picture Tony Dungie patrolling the sidelines. Who is doing the real work on the field? Sure, Tony was important to their success, but largely by preparing them, equipping them for the work they had to do. Pastors, like coaches, prepare and equip their teams for the real action out on the field—the field of life.

One of the attractive dynamics at work here at Second Presbyterian Church is that many of you get this. People like BJ Green, Fritz Hohlt, Jim and Ina Van Duyn, tutoring kids at Westminster ministries; Don Lucas and the work team taking care of the building at Westminster; Stan Mars coordinating our trustworthy ushers; David McGlynn, Gretchen Brown and Larry Treadwell encouraging the development of our new “Hospitality” ministry team; or Elders like Dan Yates and Bud Melton using their vast professional experience to oversee the Business Affairs Committee of your Session. All are examples of doing the work of ministry!

I know many of you are involved in the work of ministry. But I also know there are many more who could be.

What are you doing to build up the Body of Christ? How are you using your gifts for the sake of the Kingdom? Is there a place to plug into you’ve been thinking about but have yet to make the connection? Maybe ushering on Sunday morning, singing with the summer choir, or working with the children and family ministries teams teaching Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, or maybe working with our youth groups.

Which reminds me of someone I’ve grown to love here at Second. Ed Friel, is a Vice President at Cummins Diesel in Indianapolis. When he joined Second Presbyterian Church almost 15 years ago he asked Ray Bowden—who was running our new members class at the time—“What’s the toughest job in the church?” Ray thought for a minute, and replied “teaching junior high Sunday School” “Where do I sign up?” asked Ed, and he’s been doing it with joy and enthusiasm ever since.

Obviously that’s not for everybody, but how will you know unless you try? Unwrap the gift! Maybe you’re better one-on-one than up front of a squadron of early adolescents. Care Corps might be a perfect fit. Or, perhaps tutoring at Westminster, one-on-one with a child with whom you could really make a difference. Ask Larry and Nancy Treadwell, Jack and Lori Mansell, or Bob and Kay Mace about how it’s changed their lives.

But ministry doesn’t have to take place within existing structures or programs. Maybe there’s some great need in the community of which you’re aware of that isn’t being met. Let me give you two relatively recent examples: Dave Berry, got a call a few years ago from a social service agency who was trying to help a teenage girl recently

confined to a wheel chair by a car accident. She was about to be removed from her home because it didn't meet accessibility standards for her wheelchair. Hiring a contractor to build the ramps necessary to meet the code requirements would've cost some three thousand dollars—far more than her parents could scrape together.

Dave made a few phone calls, and a few guys responded - building the family ramps for the front and back doors. And just like that, a new ministry team was born. Rick Hagerty and the guys got good at it, began buying building materials, got an architect and a couple of engineers involved to aid in the design process, creating templates for cutting the materials to size. They call themselves SAWS—for Servants At Work and they've recently built their 30th ramp at 1/6th the cost of hiring a contractor. That's 30 people who've been able to remain in their homes, not be separated from their families—all because a few guys said "yes" to a request for help. They have a list of 30 more requests this year alone. They saw the need, had fun meeting it together, grounded their time together in prayer, and occasionally studied the Bible—which, it turns out, has lots to say about supporting widows and orphans, caring for the sick and restoring mobility to the lame.

A second example: A few young mothers here at Second were lamenting the fact that they'd not felt as supported and cared for with their first babies as they would have liked. They approached my wife Tassie about their experiences and were asked: "What should we do about that?" Note the pronoun. Tassie didn't ask what she should do about it. Those moms gathered others around them, shared their vision and have coordinated the delivery of three home-made meals and a monthly check-in by an experienced mom for some 60 new mothers in the last 18 months—another team of saints doing ministry. Mary Beth Baker and BethAnn Kaltenmark have sought help at every level of involvement: cooking meals and delivering them, and calling young moms to offer encouragement and support. In addition to welcoming these young families within our family of faith, this ministry team has created opportunities to be involved in the work of ministry for our whole congregation. Young children helping their mom cook dinner and then delivering it as an entire family before eating their own meal. Older single-adults at home cooking extra portions, young working couples delivering them, or middle-aged women calling young mothers just to check-in with a young woman with her first new-born at home; the whole community of faith—caring for each other, building up the body of Christ.

Is there a need you've noticed in this church or community recently? Has the Spirit been gently nudging you about it for a while—or maybe you've needed a gentle whack on the side of the head for God to get your attention. Can you get at least three others interested in helping you? Then talk with a pastor or a current Elder and see if your idea meets any reasoned resistance.

My friend John Westfall, now a pastor in Minnesota, co-wrote a book about pastoral leadership called *Let Go!* in which he argues that one of the most important skill sets for a pastor is the ability to stop standing on the hose and simply let the water of the Spirit flow freely through others.

Which of your gifts is sitting unused, gathering dust on a shelf of your life? Or hidden in a closet, just waiting to be discovered? Dust it off, unwrap it. It may be just what is needed for the building up of the Body of Christ. For God calls us all to the work of ministry. Which of your gifts is God currently calling you to use in Kingdom service? "Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift." Let us be gift-peekers around here; eager to unwrap our own gifts, encouraging one another to try them out and use them as God intended when He gave them by the Holy Spirit.

Unwrap the gift! Amen.