

Sharing Spirit-Given Gifts
A Sermon on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
Sunday January 17, 2010
Trinity United, Ottawa
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Gift-giving is an act that gives us joy, but it isn't always comfortable, especially when gifts are opened to display to a group. As a very shy child, I loved the feeling of acceptance when I was invited to a birthday party, but I often felt squirmingly uncomfortable until the gift-opening ritual was over - and hopefully forgotten.

In the birthday party present competition, my family with seven kids just couldn't afford to compete. So I dreaded that moment when the birthday girl tore off the modest, tissue paper wrapping my mom had hastily scotch taped around my gift, feeling as exposed as the paint-by-number set out of its pink paper. I usually felt that the gift I'd brought was a little shabby compared to other people's offerings. Mine was not to be the present that evoked whoops of joy and girl sighs of admiration and envy. The best I hoped for was a polite "Thank you."

I wondered, from time to time if that Magi man, who gave frankincense to the baby Jesus, was uncomfortable, coming after the guy with the shiny gift of gold? And what about the one who brought myrrh?! What the heck is myrrh? I'm sure Mary and Joseph were very polite about it!

Sometimes the sharing of our Spirit-given gifts can feel that uncomfortable too. Especially if we find ourselves in competition. If we feel vulnerable to unfavourable comparison or envy. Or if we are shy, perhaps sensing from the group that only certain kinds of gifts - not the ones we bring - are really valuable.

Some of that was going on in Corinth in the new community of Jesus followers that Paul had founded in this thriving first century multicultural Greek port city. Paul's first letter to the congregation of Corinth was evidently his answer to a letter that

reported problems among the brothers and sisters in Christ. We can infer from Paul's response that some individuals who had a gift for 'utterance' - supposedly voicing the Spirit direction for community life - were claiming undue power, and perhaps even leading people astray with false witness.

Paul's advice to his church in this portion of his lengthy letter, is twofold. First, in verses two and three, he gently advises the Corinthian community to be careful who they listen to. He writes that odd quotation "Let Jesus be cursed!" So who, in a church, we can't help but wonder, is going to say that?! Perhaps someone babbling in tongues? But perhaps Paul's message here is simply to look for evidence in the words of those espousing the Gift of 'utterance', that their message is consistent with Jesus' Way. With Jesus as Lord. To discern together wisely that whatever the message, it come in the name of the Lord, sounding like Jesus-centred truth.

Then, in verses 4 through 11, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the Spirit gives a wide variety of individual gifts to people, each authentic gift always and only intended to serve the common good of the community. Not for the ego gratification of the individual. Not as a way to compete or compare or claim power. Spiritual gifts, so many different kinds of talents and qualities, are given because all are really needed for Kingdom-community building. Paul explains that only the Spirit chooses how these gifts are allotted and only the Spirit 'activates' them - releasing their palpable Spiritual energy.

Our Spiritual gifts are only 'activated' when they are released into community. Sometimes we actually feel a shiver when we are meant to give a gift of the Spirit. There is suddenly energy for doing what we're too busy to do, a rush of joy, a deep knowing, a release of tears, or we are stirred by a heartfelt affirmation of our gift from someone else. This is the resonance of the Holy Spirit activating us to release our next gift into the world. To do the next good thing, the God thing, that somehow, surprisingly, we are given, to help celebrate the baby Jesus' new Kingdom.

Often, a new Spiritual Gift is only opened when someone else identifies it for us. “You are so good at You’re the one who could...!” The United Church has just produced a two minute video, encouraging congregations to ‘tap people on the shoulder’ and tell them their gifts for ministry. So at Scripture Circle this week, when someone was reluctant to identify her spiritual gift, Helen tapped her on the shoulder and said “You, _____, have the gift of wisdom.” And we all resonated with that as True. And she tapped another of the elders, saying: “You have the Gift of telling it like it is, and that is a gift of courage.” Again, we all nodded, recognizing this individual’s spiritual gift to our Trinity community.

Often, people are surprised to discover their spiritual gifts. Especially, I think, our oldest generation who are modest and humble to a fault. They’ve never been encouraged to unwrap their spiritual gifts, though they may have been unknowingly sharing them all their lives.

For instance, this Christ quality of this community depends vitally on the gifts of our oldest elders. The Gift of uttering wisdom, born of life experience, has been valued in congregations ever since Corinth. Such strength and character witness, some older individuals give to Jesus Kingdom through Trinity! And oh, the gift of patient loving listening, from one who has time to really sit down with us and hear our worries and struggles. Who better than a grandmother or grandfather? Good active listening activates a release of Spirit energy for both people. As does the gift of long life earned and learned advice. And the gift of powerful well-practised prayer! You can move Spirit energy to God’s healing purpose, even if you are stuck in beg. .

As for the gift of utterance - sharing words of the Spirit - its often amazing to those who get this gift, when they discover they can give it. The words of the shy one are noticed and often notable. The Spirit often fuels the sudden speech of those who have to overcome fear to offer their voice. Moses was such a one. A shy Spirit-called leader. You know some others, here? Maybe you are next?

Opening up our Spirit-given gifts isn't always comfortable or easy. Often it feels scary at first. But with a Spirit push you can step over your fear to contribute to the common good.. It can be difficult to dare to give our gifts. But Trinity is truly a safe place to give in a new way. And once activated, the fruit of your Spiritual Gifts will be common goodness and justice and a new share of joy.

Do you know what your Spirit-given gifts are? Perhaps we can all make a point of tapping each other on the shoulder, and proclaiming each other's gifts? Let's be sure that everyone knows they have God-given gifts that we need and value here. And if you would like to discover some of your Gifts in a more private way, pick up one of the Spiritual Gifts Inventories in the Art Gallery. Let yourself be surprised by what God has wrapped up in you. Something that Trinity and the Kingdom need to open. A surprise, that opens like the petals of a lotus flower. Perfect in pink.

That spiritual gift, still to be given is why you are here. And why you are still here. Discover your gifts and share. And if you'll come have a conversation with me about your Spiritual Gifts discovery, we'll make a party of it. A party where all the gifts are beyond compare!