

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

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**May 23, 2021**

**Romans 12:4–8**

**1 Corinthians 12:1–11, 27**

Let us pray. Come Holy Spirit! Come with the power of a great wind, to clear out the cobwebs of our hearts, or come stealthily, as close as our own breathing, to whisper your truth into the silence of our lives.

However you come, come with the power to change us that we might truly become the body of Christ in the world. Amen.

**Romans 12:4–8**

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

**1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 27**

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to

another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Over the next several weeks, as on way to get to know me a little better, I thought it could be helpful to share with you through several weeks of sermons thoughts on the nature and attributes of the church. That is, why the church is important for the world, and what are the things that define the church. When I thought about this sermon series, I initially thought it would be helpful to begin with talking about why the church even exists, why God chose the church as one of the primary ways to work in the world. However, given that today is the day we celebrate Pentecost, what some call the birthday of the church, the day Holy Spirit came to all the people, I thought it helpful that we start a little out of order and talk about the Holy Spirit and specifically how it equips the church in giftedness.

I want you to imagine with me for a moment. I am going to tell you a brief made-up story about a couple going through some difficulty. Again, to be clear, this is a made-up story, but certainly one that could be happening in our church.

Imagine if you will a couple, let's call them Shannon and Jane. Pretend for a moment that they are members of Oak Grove. Jane is part of the Gifts and Gratitude team at church and is organizing this year's Stewardship campaign. Shannon has been very active with Oasis and the Green Committee and has organized volunteers for various events.

Shannon and Jane have been together for a number of years, they have two active children, ages 5 and 3. Jane is pregnant, and it has been a difficult pregnancy. Jane and Shannon have just been told by their

doctor that Jane will need to be on bed rest at home for the last two months of her pregnancy. Shannon and Jane are extremely anxious about this new development, but know that they need to follow the doctor's orders so that the baby can be carried to term and have a healthy delivery.

On top of Jane requiring bed rest, Shannon has a demanding job that requires some travel. Shannon is frequently gone for days at a time because of the job. In addition, Shannon has sole responsibility of her grandmother who lives in a nearby nursing home. Shannon and Jane have a lot to deal with.

Think for a moment, on your own, about some of the needs this family of Oak Grove might have. Now, if we were all together in the sanctuary, I would ask you to speak aloud some of those needs and name something you could do to help Shannon, Jane, their kids and Shannon's grandmother. What could you do to help?

*Play with the kids, organize meals, make meals, visit with the grandmother, hire a cleaning service, sit with Jane, pray for them, provide bible verses that would encourage them, take over the stewardship campaign, take the kids to school, give them money for take-out.*

There are a variety of ideas that we could come up with. All of them are helpful and useful. Maybe some of the things I mentioned, you could see yourself doing? Were there items mentioned that you would have a hard time doing, or wouldn't come to you easily if you were asked? Were there some items you hadn't even thought of? Or maybe you thought of one I didn't mention?

Some of the things we were just describing were spiritual gifts; as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians and in Romans, spiritual gifts are

those abilities given to us by God for the common good. If the church is created by God, and called by God, what then does the church specifically look like?

One of the qualities of the church is it is made up of people who have been given particular gifts to be used in service for the common good. Paul is talking to the Roman church and to the church at Corinth to let them know that they all have gifts given them by God and they need to use those gifts in the service of God's mission.

Now, some people, many in fact, find it difficult to believe that they are gifted. These doubts come from a variety of places. Some people think, maybe they are gifted, but they think their gifts are insignificant. In our culture, after all, we lift up the celebrity, the expert, and the virtuoso. It becomes easy for us sometimes to sell ourselves short.

Doubts creep in because there are some gifts, perhaps, that are easier to recognize than others. But even if your gifts are less recognizable they are indeed worthy as the gifts to which the world pays attention. Think about that special knack a person has for encouraging others to try again, or a friend with a gentle and calming influence during a crisis, or the person who can turn chaos into an organized filing system. Given the biases of our society, these individuals may not be recognized as the gifted people they are. If we are one of these people with quieter gifts, sometimes we think they aren't as important.

Some are convinced that they are of little value because they don't have the right gift. By fixating on that one "right" gift they often miss noticing the multiple gifts they do have. This focus can make otherwise talented people feel inadequate. Have you ever heard someone say something like, "All I did was cook a meal when they were sick," or "I just prayed for them was all." In truth, prayer and the hospitality of a

warm meal is a vital part of church life and a significant help to those in need.

Sometimes, people may have a hard time recognizing their gifts as God-given and a necessary part of God's work. My mother died a little over 11 years ago, after a long battle with a rare form of cancer. She dealt with this sickness for over almost 20 years, and the last several years of her life were difficult. She worked for as long as she could before she just no longer was able to keep up with her job. Toward the end of her life we had a deep and significant conversation that I have never forgotten. She was reviewing her life, and she surprised me when she said as she was worried that she had not done enough for the world in service to God. She was worried that she hadn't contributed enough with her gifts.

This was tough for me to hear. I loved and admired my mother immensely. I respected her deeply and I could not have been more proud of who she was and what she has contributed to the world. So it was hard to hear her doubt herself.

My mother had done a lot of what we might call "church work." She had been a deacon and an elder, she served on countless committees and she was the moderator of her Presbytery. She was more Presbyterian than a lot of Presbyterians I knew.

What perplexed me about our conversation was that she had this idea that the work she did outside of the church didn't count. My mother was a nurse for over 25 years, and for most of those years she was a perinatal grief support nurse. It was her job to help parents who had a baby die prematurely. In those over 20 years, she helped close to 10,000 parents deal with this unbearable grief. Not only that, she educated doctors and nurses on how to cope with this tragedy, had hospital policies changed, and worked toward creating legislation all to help with this

immeasurable grief people face. She served on the board of a national organization that deals with infant death and pregnancy loss. She was part of the national faculty for bereavement services and trained hundreds of others across the nation to become perinatal grief support nurses. She told me once that from the age of 5 when her parents bought her a book called “Nurse Nancy” that came complete with a hypodermic needle and fake pills, that she knew she wanted to be a nurse, and when she started with her grief work, she knew she was called by God to do that work. But yet, she didn’t think she was doing enough for God, or that this very important work for which she was gifted and called didn’t count because it wasn’t “church work.”

What pains me about this is that somewhere the church did a great disservice to my mother. How this woman, this remarkable woman, who clearly was gifted and called to such important work, could think that it didn’t count because it wasn’t what some call “church work,” is a tragedy.

I think we sometimes don’t believe we are gifted because of the way we talk about giftedness. In our world when we hear that someone is gifted, we assume that it means that someone is gifted in a way that other people aren’t. It means that they are naturally better at something than we are.

Writer and preacher, Nadia Bolz Weber, hits on this idea of our misunderstanding that being gifted means that someone is naturally better at something, in a way that most people aren’t. Nadia writes, “like you’d never say, ‘wow, Bob, is really gifted at breathing oxygen’ because being gifted means having a special ability that not everyone has.” Which makes sense on one level, but I believe that thinking misses the point of how God, through the Spirit, gives gift for the church.

It's not like we expect that someone has to be super-gifted at something in order to be a part of the church. Or like we hold people with certain gifts higher than others. In fact, Paul says just the opposite of this.

Yes, we all have our unique gifts, but we are all gifted. When Paul is talking about gifts in Corinthians, he always uses the plural. A variety of gifts. While there is the one body, that is the many members that make up the whole church, it is a variety of gifts that are given to the people in the church and no specific spiritual gift is better than another. A variety of gifts and a variety of avenues and ways to use them. No one talent or avenue of service or activity is better than the other. They are different, but there are no "bragging rights," in any of these things.

This is where the church at Corinth got into difficulty. People got to thinking things like, "My gift is really very important. Yours is good, but mine is **really** important!" After this 12<sup>th</sup> chapter in Corinthians, comes one of the most famous, and most misused pieces of scripture, 1 Corinthians 13, perhaps you are familiar with this piece of scripture. It begins, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." It says, "Love is patient, love is kind," and the passage ends with "Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love." Perhaps you have heard this, most likely at a wedding.

Here's the funny thing about that. It seems like wonderful poetry about love, how it's kind, and patients, and not arrogant. And it is all of that, but the context for this letter is not for Paul to write beautiful love poetry. It's not to talk about the virtues of romantic love. But Paul is actually taking the Corinthian church to task for playing favorites with their giftedness. The community at Corinth had decided that some gifts were more important than others, specifically the gift of tongues. So when Paul says that if I speak in the tongue of angels, that is, if someone

has a particular gift for speaking in tongues, but treats everyone as less than them because of it, if there is no love, than that person might as well be a clanging noisy gong. Their actions speak louder than their gift. Paul is reminding the Corinthians that all gifts given by God are special and to be honored and needed.

I heard a preacher say once that whenever we get to 1 Corinthians 13, that a proper reading of the passage would be one that is marked by frustration and a note of anger, perhaps even with a raised voice and a pounding of the fist. So that a proper reading might sound more like, "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious and boastful or arrogant or rude." "Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love."

There are no bragging rights when it comes to the gifts that all of us are given. We cannot say that it is more important to sing in the choir, bring a meal to someone in need, lend an ear to someone that is suffering, offer a prayer for a friend in need, give our money to a particular cause of the church, serve on Session, or lead a Sunday school class for the littlest ones or even the adults. Paul appeals to the church, "Please know that all our talents and all our ways of serving God and all the activities we engage in are equal in the eyes of God - there are no bragging rights in the community of Jesus Christ."

All of us have a stake in this. None of us has been excluded from the "giftedness" God bestows on this church. And the reason that we have these gifts is incredibly important. The key phrase in Paul's letter is this: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." The common good. God's Holy Spirit gives each one of us a unique gift for the good of all of God's creation. Paul points us beyond our individual activities to the grand scheme of what God is doing in the

world. We cannot talk about gifts of the Spirit without talking about serving Jesus Christ. And we cannot talk about serving Jesus Christ without serving the world God loves. In the reign of God, there is no distinction between personal life and public life. There is no separation of "spiritual things" from the matters of this world, whether they be family life, local economy, national politics, or global suffering.

And we don't do this individually, but we do it together. It's not just the leaders of the church, the Session and the Deacons. It's not just Mary, or Britta, or me. All the gifts are needed. For each of us, our unique contributions count. Paul listed some pretty amazing gifts, like wisdom, faith, knowledge, discernment, teaching and hospitality. One person can't be all those things. It makes sense that in the one body with many members that there be people who are wise, or who are great teachers, who are discerning, who can lift remarkably beautiful prayers, or who can make sure everyone feels welcome and no one is left out. Being part of this one body with many members, means relying on the gifts of God given to our brothers and sisters and them having to rely on the gifts entrusted to us. This "is God's intention for those who bear the name Christian. We don't have what it takes to love God, pray to God and follow God alone."

My hope is that all of us can picture ourselves as vital elements in God's plan for the church for the world, for that is what you are: a special mix of gifts that God has chosen uniquely for you. We have been created in the image of God - we are created in a way that reflects God! And all of us have been created with a unique, specially chosen blend of gifts to serve the world.

Sometime in the future, I will teach (along with my wife Kelly) a class to help people identify and understand their spiritual gifts. If you have never identified your gifts, if you have a suspicion about being gifted at

all, if you are wondering how God might be calling you to use your gifts for the common good out in the world, I encourage you to try and take advantage of the class. Because using our gifts can only happen if we take the time to know what they are, and if we take the time to figure out how to use them. The people that make up Oak Grove have a part to play in God's mission for the world. It matters that we are here. We are called to be a specific people in a specific time and a specific place. Each of you have gifts to bring and to use. I look forward to finding out together what we can do with the gifts we have been given.