

“Gifts for the Common Good”
January 19, 2025
Scripture: Isaiah 62:1-5; I Corinthians 12:1-11

I realize not everyone shares my fascination with the Bible, or at least they don't share the way I'm fascinated by it. Most of us were raised to read the Bible devotionally. We go to it for comfort or sometimes for answers to our difficulties. The Bible is a source of inspiration and offers us a foundation that's stable when so much around us is precarious. But the Bible is also an historical document. It was written by people like us, people who puzzled over the injustices and inconsistencies of a world beyond their control.

So, while the writers of the Bible were certainly inspired by their devotion to God, they were also limited by their time and place. And they wrote with their own people in mind, to address the challenges experienced by their neighbors and not for people like us. Which to me makes what they wrote all the more brilliant because, in spite of the historical distance between us and them, their words still hold meaning for us. They still speak to us and have insights to offer we cannot afford to ignore.

The Bible's made up of a large number of very different forms of writing. Some of it is prophetic, some historical, some parable. But in the New Testament the main form of writing is personal correspondence; letters. Aside from the gospels and Acts, everything in the New Testament is a letter written by a leader of some kind to a small community. Sometimes it's not clear who exactly that community is, such as in Hebrews, which reads more like a sermon than letter, really. But other times it's explicit. In fact, one letter, Philemon, is written to an individual and not a community.

Many of these letters were written by Paul himself and several are written in his voice, borrowing his authority. The letters to the Corinthians, virtually all scholars agree, were written by Paul himself. And because they are letters, they give us a unique window on what life in that time and place was like for a struggling community. If you've read First Corinthians, then you know that folks in that community weren't getting along very well. Because they're a new organization they're having trouble figuring out how to relate to one another. How do they decide who's in charge? How do they know when a rule has been broken? How do they know who they can trust?

They're limited to their context in Roman society, so their tendency is to look at how things are done in other organizations around them and model themselves on those behaviors. Roman society was rigidly hierarchical. Everyone had a place that was assigned at birth and there were very few ways to change that social status. That meant that most organizations were made up of people with roughly the same social status. But the communities Paul founded were socially diverse. There were social differences in the Jewish world in which Paul was raised but those were more malleable. And one concept, *mishpat* or justice, insisted that the weak and the powerful be treated equally in the eyes of the law.

So, no one had a claim to inherent superiority, unlike in Roman society where that would have been understood. The Corinthian Christians had trouble adjusting to this radical egalitarianism where everyone was respected and valued, no matter what background they had or what their social condition was. And since they didn't have a built-in hierarchy, they created one.

A lot of the conflict in this community was caused by a hierarchy of gifts or abilities they came up with arbitrarily. In that hierarchy something called "tongues," was placed at the top. Some of you may be familiar with that phenomenon. It's a form of ecstatic speech that is mostly unintelligible. Occasionally you might hear about some researcher who claims people experiencing it are actually speaking some ancient dialect, but I think that's mostly wishful thinking. But it's been a phenomenon for a long time. It's mentioned several times in the New Testament. But Paul doesn't seem all that impressed with it. And he's especially concerned that it's being used as a way to gain dominance over other people in the church.

To Paul, the problem isn't the gift itself, but how it's being used. That's what this section of his letter is all about. He says these gifts don't come from nowhere. They come from the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit isn't interested in establishing a hierarchy that allows one person or group to have dominance over another. The Holy Spirit works for the common good. And any gifts the Holy Spirit activates in a person are meant to serve the common good. And it's important how Paul lists some of those gifts. I don't think this list is meant to be exhaustive, but in a letter like this it would be normal to list things from the most important to the least important, in the eyes of the writer anyway. He lists wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working miracles, prophecy, discernment, and then at the very bottom, tongues and the interpretation of tongues. This is Paul's way of signaling to those folks who have placed speaking in tongues on a pedestal that they're mistaken.

Paul understood the danger of assigning status arbitrarily, the way Roman society did. And the idea, in that society, of the common good would have been strange. A person with power in the Roman world was expected to benefit from that power. They weren't obligated to serve society. But in the Jewish world, the biblical world, serving the community is at the heart of Torah. For Paul, the ultimate of that service is the crucifixion of Christ. He gives up all power for the sake of the world. In doing that, Christ becomes our model of self-sacrifice. Jesus' sacrifice isn't made so we won't have to; his sacrifice is made to show us how.

The idea of serving the common good, even to the point of self-sacrifice, is an ideal that lies at the heart of our own country's ethos. We recently held services for former President Jimmy Carter. If you had a chance to hear some of the eulogies that were delivered at his service, you heard about a man who used his power as a former president to serve the common good. He and his wife Rosalyn spent their retirement years traveling all over the world building houses for people in poverty through Habitat for Humanity, helping eradicate the scourge of Guinea worm disease in the world, working with countries struggling to become democracies to further the spread of freedom. He and his wife were selfless in their service. And I suspect if you asked him why, he would have said it was his faith and his commitment to the American ideal that motivated him.

Paul was mostly thinking about the small community of Christians when he wrote his letters. He didn't imagine, I suspect, the whole Roman Empire could be transformed. But the Bible, in other places, looks beyond the small community in its vision. Isaiah imagines the whole people of Israel lifted up by God as a shining jewel in the world. And in being lifted up, Israel could become a beacon for the world to follow. But even that vision begins with a small community. We are called to use our gifts to serve the common good no matter how limited our community might be. We're like a stone tossed into a pond where the ripples extend out and affect everything around us.

So, it matters how we use our gifts in the world. It matters where we place our trust. The other night President Joe Biden delivered his farewell address in which he warned us about the rise of an oligarchy in our society. Putting tremendous wealth in the hands of a very few and giving them access to power threatens the common good. We've seen that happen in places like Russia and Hungary and other parts of the world. Do we trust them to serve the common good and not use their gifts to dominate others? Would Paul?

I think this is why reading the Bible is so important. Understanding what others have been through and how they responded to challenges to their identity or their commitments gives us insight into how we can respond. It lays a foundation of values rooted in love of God and neighbor that can help us discern how best to use our gifts to serve the common good. Because the Holy Spirit works through us still. Gifts are activated in us just as clearly as they were in the people around Paul. We need wisdom and knowledge, faith and discernment to help us navigate in a world crying out for healing. God calls us to serve the world in the name of Christ, to give of ourselves in every way we can, and to use our gifts for the sake of the common good in this place and wherever the Holy Spirit leads.

Amen