

## **Songs of Community and the Common Good**

**I Corinthians 12:4-11**

**First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**

**August 30, 2020**

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In my experience there are two questions that are commonly asked during job interviews. While the exact language of the questions may differ from one interviewer to another, the core is the same - what are your greatest strengths and what are your greatest weaknesses?

My experience - of both interviewing and being interviewed - also shows that people generally answer the question about their own weaknesses more easily than the one about their strengths.

We won't take time now to explore the reasons that might be, but simply to acknowledge that sometimes we struggle to recognize our own strengths and our own giftedness.

But that doesn't seem to be a problem for some of the members of the church at Corinth. In our reading today we hear Paul addressing the question of gifts. And, knowing that Paul had a long and deep relationship with the church at Corinth, knowing that he was not hesitant to write and correct their misbehaviors or settle their conflicts, knowing that just a chapter earlier he addressed those who were so full of themselves that they came to the table and ate and drank without regard for those who would come later...knowing all of this, we might anticipate that some of the members of the church were struggling with the temptation to inflate their gifts.

Yes, as New Testament Professor Richard Carlson writes, "The problem is that some spiritual elitists have really messed this up. They have regarded their gifts of the Spirit as making them superior to other members of the Corinthian community" ([https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2737](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2737)).

And Paul is writing to straighten that out.

After all, Paul wants everyone to understand that whatever giftedness they have is from the Spirit and is for the common good.

Contrary to what it seems some have decided, there are not better or worse gifts. Different? Yes. But there isn't a hierarchy of gifts; we don't start with the gift of hospitality and then move to the gift of healing and then culminate with the gift of proclamation. Rather, all of these gifts are given, as Paul says again and again, by the same Spirit and for the common good.

And yet, we too sometimes fall into the same trap that early Christians do. Let's be honest - there are a lot of us who envy the gifts that people like Laura and Kalea and Gayle and others have to sing and play music. Those of us whose gifts are in

organizing or cleaning or other roles that often stay in the background, sometimes envy the attention and recognition given to those who are “performing” up front.

And, beyond the church, we know that there are jobs in our communities that are honored in ways that others are not. While we might encourage kids to aspire to be doctors or lawyers or professional athletes, rarely do we encourage them to aspire to be trash collectors or grocery store workers or many of the others jobs that COVID has reminded us are essential to our living. And largely that is because our culture places a hierarchy, often made clear in salaries and benefits, on these various roles and positions.

So, even though we like to climb the proverbial ladder and know who is most important, Paul says that the gifts we have aren't about who is better than whom, but instead about each of us doing what we are called to do and doing it not for ourselves or our own recognition, but for the common good.

And that is another thing we sometimes struggle with. Especially when we have those gifts that are more flashy, more easily recognized, it is so easy to get caught up in the performance aspects, in the recognition, in the kudos that we receive and to forget what these gifts are all about to begin with. It is easy to lose touch with the Spirit who gave them and the reason they were given.

It is especially easy in a culture that focuses on the individual and that sends message upon message about individual responsibility and pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps and rugged individualism. These messages that are part of our nation's history and our present distract us from the message of the gospel which is a message about community and the common good.

And so, not only do we use those things we might identify as gifts or talents for our own good, but we also use our resources, our connections, our privilege to secure our power and advance our place. And too often we do this to the detriment of others.

How would our communities look different if we really believed that everyone had a gift and that all gifts were, while distinct, equally valuable? How would that change how we looked upon the young and the old, the differently abled and those new to the community?

How would our communities look different if we understood how interconnected we are...how our gifts work together in ways that make us - collectively - better? If we pay attention to the list in I Corinthians, we see that reminder right there...Paul names things like speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues, or prophecy and the discernment of spirits which is about recognizing whether a prophet is true or false (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 1991, footnote page 242). He does this reminding us that our gifts aren't independent of each other, but rather we not only use them for the good of others, but they work best when used together.

And how would our communities look different if we really understood our gifts to be about the common good? If we held the common good at the center of our community,

how would our gifts help to include those who have been excluded, to level the playing field bringing equity for all, to open us up to hearing from voices that have long been silenced?

At the beginning of worship we sang words like, "Now direct our daily labor lest we strive for self alone" and "treasure too you have entrusted...ours to use for home and kindred, and to spread the gospel Word." And that hymn ended saying, "Open wide our hands in sharing, as we heed Christ's ageless call, healing, teaching, and reclaiming, serving you by loving all."

That is what our giftedness is about - it is about sharing the love of God, in very real ways, with all the world. It is about building communities where all are honored, where all are valued, where all are heard, where all are loved.

Friends, you are gifted...may you use your gifts to make this world what God intends. Amen.