

- Pastor Keith Madsen
Sunday, 10/18/15

“Five Challenges: Believe in the Gifts God has Given You”

1 Corinthians 12:4-27

Well, after being interrupted by Salmon Days, and two Sundays off, I'm ready to get back to my sermon series again! As I said previously, as I am approaching the time of my retirement, I thought it might be helpful to focus my last ten sermons on the ten thoughts I want to leave this church. The first five will be challenges which I want to lay before this church as you move forward, and the last five will be thoughts of comfort I want to encourage you with.

I shared my third challenge in this month's article for *The Bell*. So now the fourth challenge I want to give to this church is, *the people of this church need to believe in the gifts God has given you*. Some of you might be thinking, *what gifts are those exactly?* You might look at Velma or Duane and say, well they have musical gifts – is that what the Pastor is talking about? Or maybe you look at Jackie and say, *well, Jackie has a gift for floral arrangement – is that what he is talking about?* But I'm not talking about a few isolated individuals at all – I'm talking about all of you as a church. God has gifted each one of you with abilities you can use to strengthen this church and our ministry in this community and the world. Do you believe that?

So often we look at our own personal resources and they seem so small when compared to the magnitude of the tasks we must face. We are called to change, but the forces which bind us to sameness seem overwhelming. We are called to make an impact on our world, but we feel like we are trying to move a mountain with a hand spade. We are called to bring love to our relationships, and at times we can't even find that love within ourselves. For many of us there are times when we look within and find that faith is but a remnant of what it once was, hope contains more shadow than light, and love is being pushed into a corner by the forces of rage and bitterness. Where can we find enough faith, hope and love to be Christ's person?

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 12, calls us to believe something which for some of us is pretty incredible to believe: that while we might think our internal resources are inadequate, *God has given each of us powerful gifts with which to make a difference in this church, and in the world!* We do have differences, but those are all differences that contribute to the Body of Christ. We are different in gifts, services, activities. In relation to this, verse 7 is central. It tells us that each person has some gift to contribute to the common good. Then Paul goes on to list some examples. We need to remember that what he writes here are but a few examples, and that this is not meant to be an all-inclusive list.

There are other lists of such “spiritual gifts” in Scripture, including verses 27-30 at the end of this chapter, Romans 12 (where we find included the gifts of teaching, generosity, leadership, compassion, cheerfulness), and Ephesians 4:11-12. It is probable that Paul would not have even called all of these a complete list. As broad as the challenges are that people face in this life, that is how broad the list of gifts given by the Holy Spirit needs to be.

In the church, we are to function like a body. This means that diversity is essential. Diversity is a popular concept today, but it is not new. Paul here underlines the fact that in the church “it takes all kinds,” and that the differences between us, far from being a weakness, ought to be one of the strengths of the church. Old people need young people, and young people need old. English-speaking people of European background need African-Americans and Hispanics and Asians, and vice versa. “Liberals” need “conservatives” and “conservatives” need “liberals.”

Paul leaves no room for inferiority complexes. We can’t say, “Why couldn’t God have made me like so-and-so? But he also leaves no room for those with an “I don’t need you!” attitude. In some respects that is the ideal that some Americans hold up as the American ideal – the lone cowboy who rides off into the sunset. That is the opposite of what this passage is about. This is more like “The Three Musketeers” motto – “One for all, and all for one!” Or as Paul writes it in verse 26, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.”

Paul’s main analogy here is the physical body. We can see the logic of what he says that a body needs all of its parts. What would a body be like if it were one huge eye or one huge ear? Every part has to contribute for the body to function properly. If one part malfunctions, the whole body is affected. If you have a headache or a stomach ache or sore feet, doesn’t it affect your whole body? The same is true with the church. What affects one part, affects all.

I see two important implications of this. One is that the church needs *you*! Perhaps you might feel like no one needs you, but that is not true. Your task is not to determine *if* this church needs you, but *how* this church needs you. For persons who struggle with that task, I would suggest you ask your friends what they see as your strengths, as what you have to contribute to others. And sometimes the gift a person has is helping other people know what gifts *they* have. Wilson Goode rose from being a poor black sharecropper’s son from North Carolina, who could hardly speak because of a bad stutter, to becoming the first black mayor of Philadelphia. He later became a minister and was awarded the Purpose Prize, an award given to individuals over 60 who are working to address critical social problems. As a youth he ran into many people who told him that whatever was inside of him was too small to amount to anything. But he writes, “When others said I couldn’t do something, God always provided someone to tell me I could.” Maybe that is your gift – helping people see what they *can* do, instead of focusing on what they *cannot* do.

But another implication of Paul’s metaphor about the body needing all of its parts is that, the Church as a whole needs this particular church as we are witnessing in Issaquah, Washington. Christ *needs* us. His Church *needs* us. It’s important that this church believes that. We cannot afford to think that if we ceased to exist as a church, it would make no difference to Christ’s work in this community. Christ needs us here!

Let me say, too, that when we are talking about the various gifts God gives us to serve him, we should remember what Paul says in the next chapter of 1 Corinthians – *the greatest of these is love!* Paul’s great “love chapter” follows this one, and there is an important reason for that.

Chapter Twelve tells us that there is a variety of gifts, and Chapter Thirteen follows that up by saying, that even though some people think gifts like speaking in tongues and miraculously healing or prophecy are the greatest of all gifts, *the greatest of these is love!* Each and every one of us can possess the greatest gift of all, and make a difference with that gift, because the gift is *love*.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates this from a book called *The Ministry of the Child* by Dennis Benson. He told of a woman who had gone to the doctor, and the doctor had found lumps throughout her body. She came to church knowing that the results of her tests would be known the following Tuesday, and, of course, she was very nervous. Her pastor, knowing this woman's situation, worked late into Saturday evening, seeking to prepare just the right sermon to give her a word of hope. But the words just wouldn't come! Here's what he says about what happened when he preached that Sunday:

“The fine phrases didn't flow, the warmth I so much wished to project seemed to have evaporated. She sat there gaunt and shriveled. Going by the look in her eyes, she had already received her death sentence. My theme was ‘hope,’ but I really felt as though I were pronouncing the last rites.

“As I ponderously launched into my third point, a small toddler left his parents in a pew toward the back and made his way down the aisle. At the fourth row from the front he paused, turned, and climbed on the seat. He sat there beside her. I don't think he said anything, just snuggled in. Her arm encircled him. He responded with a hug. He sat there with her for only a minute or so, and then he went back to his parents. But, my God, her face! I saw it. Warmth and hope once again lived in her eyes, courage shone in her bearing. She had received her gospel for the day.”

Such is the power of the gift of love, even when shown through a child. My suspicion is that sometimes when a hurting person attends our worship services here, they are strengthened as much by your smiles and caring words as they are by my sermons (although I certainly hope that my sermons also help!)

But there are other powerful gifts, and many of them are also ways of expressing love. What about listening? Many people in this world just need someone to listen to them. People who live alone. People who live with a spouse who is not a good listener. Hospitality is another gift that helps show love. Some of you are really good at helping strangers feel at ease. Is that a gift which can be used in this church? I certainly think so! Some of you are good at showing hospitality to neighbors, some of whom might be looking for a place to worship. Then there is the gift of encouragement. In the Bible, Barnabas apparently had this gift. Acts 4:36 tells us that his name meant “son of Encouragement”, and he played an important role in encouraging Paul when he began his ministry. A good encourager is important in a church – such a person helps everyone else along the way in using *their* gifts.

So, what about *your* gifts? Have you been one of those who have said or thought, “Because I can't teach like Duane, or play the piano like Velma, or handle finances like Linda, or arrange flowers like Jackie, I don't belong to the Body?” If you have thought that, our passage for today has an important message for you – “Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members

of it"! You belong! You have been given gifts by God to contribute to God's work in this church. A song we sung earlier, proclaimed "Make me a blessing". That should be the prayer of each of us. If each of you believe in the gifts God has given you, God will make you a blessing to those around you, and He will make this church a blessing to this community.