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Community Church of Issaquah
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"Gifts that Keep on Giving"

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

My sister Paige is the best gift receiver I've ever known. You are a lucky person if you can give a gift to her because you always feel so good afterwards. It's like you just hit that present out of the park, and you know her so well and picked out such a great gift. You know, it's not usually the present that's perfect... it's just that Paige is really, really good at receiving gifts. She's truly grateful, and she immediately tells you how she is going to use the gift. Have you ever known someone like Paige? Someone who literally is so genuinely happy with what you've given them no matter what it is?

Learning how to give and receive is an essential part of following Jesus. You see, we are living in the divine economy—an economy where we find ourselves the recipient of gifts. Now some of us, our minds probably immediately jump straight to the GDP, and buying high and selling low when we hear the word

economy. But in the church, the word has a broader meaning. It's more like home ec than Economics 101. It's the idea of God setting up God's house, how God has arranged our salvation, the ways in which God works in the world. And you know what, God's economy, the divine economy—it's economy of grace.

It's no accident that the words *gift* and *grace* are almost identical in Greek. We are living in a time of both *charis*, "grace" and *charism* "gift." It's a time when the Bible tells us that God's Spirit is generously poured out upon all flesh, when our sons and our daughters shall prophesy and our old men shall dream dreams. We are a gifted people—we've been given creativity, because we've been given the image of the Creator of the whole world. We've been given a new family because we've been given a new Father through the Son.

We've been given life itself because we have been given life himself, Jesus Christ.

We have been given so much by God. Gifts and grace are the ways in which the LORD sets up the divine household, not just from God to us but within humankind, the way we relate to one another. It's an economy that only works when each person individually is bringing his or her gifts to the table. Every one of us has been given a gift. "To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," Paul says.

I think some of us often feel we don't have any gifts to share. But think about that for a minute. Saying you don't have a gift to share implies that God isn't a generous giver. But the Bible says that the Lord is the giver of good gifts coming down from heaven. That means that all of us bring our own special gifts to the church and to the world. In the divine economy, everyone has something to offer, and everyone has something to receive.

You know, some of us also think we don't have anything to receive. But if we take 1 Corinthians 12 seriously each of us has something both to give and to receive. None of us is so strong we need nothing. And none of us is so weak that we give nothing.

You know, it's not always easy to recognize our gifts as gifts. God's economy is often so surprising. I recently caught a glimpse of the divine economy, however. I was out for a walk with a friend, and we were chatting away when a boy with Down syndrome came walking toward us, waving at us like he was seeing a long-lost friend.

We didn't know him from Adam, but of course we both waved back, and then in this beautiful moment he threw open his arms and headed straight for me for a hug. He wrapped his arms around me, and it was a perfect moment. Two people hugging on a walking path. How many people are there who would hug a complete stranger? Not many.

His gift to me was his unselfconsciousness, his unawareness of the social boundaries that so often do nothing but keep us apart. What a gift.

These are the kinds of gifts we need to be on the lookout for to be able to receive from one another. We need to be people well-schooled in God's economy of joy—in being given to in unexpected ways and at unexpected times. We need to learn how to receive gifts—like my sister Paige—that we perhaps didn't even know we wanted. It's learning like C.S. Lewis says, to be "surprised by joy."

You know, I think that sometimes our own gifts might be what surprise us. They might not be the gifts that we had thought we had—or the gifts that we wanted. Some of the gifts Paul talks about seem fancy. Who wouldn't want to have the gift of healing? There's a reason why healing is such a big part of many televangelists' ministries. It's

amazing to see God's work in the world in big, obvious ways like that. The gift of healing seems so special, so especially from the Spirit. But we can't be distracted by what seems to us at first sight to be the "special gifts." All gifts are for the *common good*.

A friend of mine said it well the other day, "We should want simply what the church needs. If I've got the gift of healing and what the church actually needs is the gift of administration, well, then... it doesn't matter. Or if I've got the gift of administration and what the church needs is the gift of prophecy, it's not any help." Our gifts aren't about us—they are about strengthening the ties that bind and making us a healthy, active body of Christ. And for that, *all* our gifts are needed, and when we start thinking that other gifts are better than our gifts, we stop giving what we actually have.

I went to a Christian high school where we had weekly chapel. One

week a charismatic pastor preached, and after the service he led a prayer session with students who stayed behind. They were praying in tongues, and it was really confusing and dramatic, and afterward everybody was talking about it.

I can remember all of us later on sitting in Bible class, trying to figure out what speaking in tongues was about. We learned that in this pastor's tradition, THE sign of having the Spirit—the one thing that really proved that a person was a Christian—was speaking in tongues, this private language that he or she shared with God.

But look at what we were experiencing. We weren't experiencing the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control. We experienced confusion, mistrust and fear. We didn't move closer to one another; we moved farther apart.

Now, I actually do believe that people can speak in tongues and that it can be a really good thing. Close friends of mine have spoken in tongues and it's deepened their understanding of God and encouraged and strengthened the church. But what Paul is telling us is that whatever gift we have—be it healing or tongues or Sunday school teaching or faithful service—each gift needs to be used to build up each member of the body. 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, “For in the *one* Spirit we were *all* baptized into *one* body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.”

This is the mark of the church. The church began when the flames of fire come down, and suddenly, though we are many, we are made one. Our differences don't have to keep us apart any longer, but they can be the gifts they were meant to be.

The key to all of these gifts that Paul is talking about—the utterances of wisdom, the faith, the miracles, the

tongues—is that all people bring their gifts so that the whole Body can be healthy.

But let's think for a moment, what makes a body healthy? If a body has been given the gift of nutritious and plentiful food, what does it need to do? It needs to burn it off! It needs to exercise. It needs to take that good food and put it to work. In other words, the gifts we are given as a body have to be given away again. If a gift is going to *continue* to be a gift and not turn to excessive fat and disease, the gift must keep on giving.

When the Puritans first came to America, the Native Americans would often invite them into their homes to smoke a pipe. Now in Native American culture at that time, there would be a beautiful, soft, red clay peace pipe that circulated throughout the tribe. When a guest came to a home, everyone smoked the pipe, and then it would be presented as a gift to the newcomer. That person, the guest,

was then supposed to do the same in his own home and give the pipe away again and thereby continue the circle of hospitality. It was very rude to keep the pipe for yourself. It would have been a breaking of hospitality, a breaking of the very nature of the gift as gift. Gifts were not supposed to be held on to.

Now imagine a young Englishman being invited to one of these gatherings and being given this beautiful pipe! The first reaction is going to be, “What an amazing artifact to send back to the British natural history museum!” Or “This is going to look really good on my hearth next to my authentic Paul Revere platter and matching pitcher!”

A British understanding of gift-giving, which I think might also be our understanding of gift giving, is that when a gift is given, it becomes personal property—our thing to keep and hold on to forever and ever and ever. But what the Native Americans understood is that deep in the very

nature of a gift is the truth that the gift must be given again.¹

Putting our gifts on a shelf to examine and admire is exactly what the Holy Spirit does NOT want us to do with the gifts we have been given. Whatever we have been given, as Paul says, it's for the *common* good. It's to be passed around. It's to be exercised. We've been given the gift so that we can give it away again.

I love the way the poet and author Lewis Hyde puts it: "A gift that cannot be given away ceases to be a gift. The Spirit of the gift is kept alive by its constant donation." The Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, is kept alive in us when we are constantly giving our gifts away. We are given wisdom and prophecy and tongues and faith and healing and service so that we can give them away again.

We are a gifted people. We are a gifted people because we worship a God of grace, a God who doesn't tire in giving good gifts to God's children. Let us receive our gifts. Let us learn to be surprised by what they turn out to be. And let's not stop with receiving. Let's turn and give again, giving our very selves. Let's be a healthy body, putting to good use what God has given us, using all things for the common good, each bringing what he or she has been given. This is who we're called to be: surprised receivers. Generous givers. Joyful people living in God's economy of grace. Amen.

¹ Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*. 25th Anniversary ed. New York: Vintage, 2007.