

Practicing Your Faith: Trust That You Are Gifted

1 Corinthians 12

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Throughout the past two weeks and for the next few weeks we have been talking about what it means...not just to talk about our faith, but to practice it. We've encouraged you to worship every chance you get, and to be a steward...or be generous.

Today I am lifting up a third practice of faith: to trust that you are gifted. Another way to say this is the church needs you. That God intends for you to use your life in service, and so God had graced you with gifts. You have a role to play in the redemptive work of God's story. So trust that you are gifted.

Our scripture reading continues from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. I am reading from the 12th chapter:

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Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

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I'm good enough.

I'm smart enough.

And doggone it, people like me.

Before he was a United States Senator from Minnesota, Al Franken played the character of Stuart Smalley on Saturday Night Live who signed off of his "Daily Affirmations" show with that quote.

Smalley's character helped satirize the self-help culture in which we live – where a focus on the individual is of primary value, often to the exclusion of the rest of the world. In his show, Smalley would offer inane and generic advice about how to be

your best self, or why you were entitled to your fair share of happiness, or why you deserved good things, or why you were an attractive person.

At first glance, this list of gifts that the Apostle Paul describes in the 12th chapter of his letter to the church in Corinth might sound a bit like Stuart Smalley's *Daily Affirmations*:

Everybody has gifts – some are just different than others.

Some people are wise. Good for them.

Some people utter knowledge.

Some people do healing.

Some people work miracles!

Everybody is important – so let's all feel good about ourselves!

For the first eight years of my ministry I worked primarily with young people in the church. If you want to experience hope and joy – sign up to be a youth advisor. Working with young people nurtured my faith and opened me to the activity of the Holy Spirit unlike any other ministry I have done.

If you have ever been in youth ministry – the chances are you have led a devotional or given a talk on the scripture we heard this morning. 1 Corinthians 12 is a standby for Youth Sundays everywhere. A little 1 Corinthians and rousing rendition of *Here I Am, Lord...* and you've got a slam-dunk for a service.

I admit that – many times – on Sunday afternoons before youth group when I was desperately flipping through my Bible to find a Scripture that fit the theme of the night – I turned to 1 Corinthians 12 because it seemed to capture something about what it means to be the church – a community of different people that God calls together for a common and holy purpose.

And maybe I was projecting my own middle-school insecurities on the youth, but I flipped to this Scripture a lot because I thought it was helpful to remind people that while everyone did have gifts...not everyone was going to be the super athlete, or the star of the musical, or the straight A student.

To paraphrase the Apostle Paul: If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be?

If the whole body were extroverted star athletes, where would the place for reflective thinkers be?

If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

If the church were made up only of people who wanted to sing in the choir, where would the people who liked to work with the homeless be?

You see – it's a scripture that writes its own devotion...

My interest was in getting the youth in the group to understand that they had gifts. I wanted them to know that they were special. But what I discovered was that while some kids (and adults) needed that reminder, for the majority, hearing that they had gifts and that they were special was nothing new. They had been told how special they were their whole lives. They had drawers' full of ribbons and gold-stars and trophies and certificates that reminded them of how gifted they were.

What they needed was not an affirmation of how good they were or how smart they were or, doggone it, how much people liked them...what they needed was a word from God that encouraged them to use their gifts for a purpose beyond themselves.

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We are conditioned to think about our gifts like the trophies that sit up on our young people's shelves: as something that sets us apart; that distinguishes us – one from another. We are also conditioned to think that our gifts are the purely the product of our hard work.

Yet our faith leads us down a different path. In the context of faith, to trust that we are gifted is to recognize that God has given us something that the world needs. To trust that we are gifted is to recognize that the gifts we possess are not a result of our hard work and determination, but a reflection of the creative imagination of God – who made us the way we are for a purpose.

It can be confusing – knowing how to understand our gifts and for what purpose we have them. It is confusing in our time – and it was confusing back then, too.

People in Corinth were pretty gifted. Corinth was a city of about 500,000; a seaport – in between two bodies of water – which meant it was a growing, cosmopolitan place, that attracted people with talent, and wisdom, and intelligence, in a variety of disciplines. With all this talent and promise and growth it make you wonder why Corinth was such a mess.

Because the reality of it was that with all of those gifts, both the city and the church of Corinth were pretty empty when it came to substance. Beneath the veneer of a community that celebrated how blessed they were was a group of people who were competitive and jealous of one another. Their trap was the same as our own: they viewed their gifts as trophies to put on their shelves. Instead of taking stock of their gifts and asking how they might use them for the sake of something else, they asked “what does this get me?”

Paul wrote his letter to the church in Corinth because he was a pastor, and he had diagnosed a spiritual problem. The issue wasn't a lack of giftedness. The issue was a lack of direction. So Paul spent an entire chapter affirming the diversity of gifts he saw in the church: knowledge, faith, interpretation, telling the truth...and then he says – but strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a more excellent way.

The more excellent way is love.

I didn't read it this morning, but you know what Paul says next: *Love is patient, love is kind, love is not arrogant or boastful or rude.* We usually hear those words and begin picturing women in matching dresses and groomsmen in rented suits on a sunny late afternoon in June. But for Paul, love is the lens through which a Christian views their gifts. You can have all the gifts in the world, Paul says, but if you don't have love the gift is a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. Without love, our gifts aren't worth anything.

Paul diagnoses something important – he knows that if the primary question in deciding how to use our gifts is “what will we get” – at the end of the day, the answer will be “not much.” The greater gift is love. And love is something that we give away.

I don't know what you may consider to be your gift. I just know you have one, and the church – and the world our church serves – can benefit from it. And I know that the way you can deepen your faith is by developing a practice of using your gift in the service of love. Love is the power that shapes the world.

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I may have told you about Claudie before. Claudie is my dad's cousin. He lives in Richmond, Virginia. Claudie was born with cerebral palsy. When it comes to gifts, some of Claudie's are limited. He will never drive a car, or hold a desk job, or give a speech.

Claudie was born in a time when most people of means (like his parents) would send a child like Claudie away to live in a group home because they didn't know how to handle someone with special needs. But Claudie's parents chose a different path. Claudie and his brother, George, attended the Collegiate Prep School in the West End of Richmond. After graduating from high school, Claudie took a job at Collegiate – he was responsible for opening up the school at the beginning of the day, and making sure everything was locked up tight at night when the day was done.

Claudie couldn't drive a car, but his mom and dad gave him an adult-sized tricycle that he would ride the mile or so between his parent's house and work .

And for close to forty years, that's what Claudie did. And in those 40 years of locking and unlocking doors, Claudie developed relationships with the students. He had a terrific memory – and knew and called every student by name. Over time, Claudie became the face of hospitality and welcome for the students at Collegiate School. When he retired a few years ago, the crowd was filled with faces of former students who wanted to thank Claudie for his smile and his friendship.

The Apostle Paul said: *If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am nothing.* I think one of the reasons students at Collegiate remember Claudie so fondly is because he showed them what it meant to love. Claudie might not have been able to give them a lecture in calculus class, but when it came to love, he was their teacher.

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A little later this morning a group of people will be joining this community of faith as members of First Presbyterian Church. In our culture, it is tempting to view the church in the same way we might misunderstand our gifts – by asking “what does this get me?” But I have a hunch that those who are joining today – like those of us who already belong to this family of faith – aren’t motivated by the question of what we might “get” out of the church. Because we know that God calls us together for the sake of something more.

God has assembled this community for a purpose.
And the purpose is to make a difference in our community, our city, and our world – in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ.

So trust that you are gifted.

And then find some way to share your life, your heart, your skill, your intelligence, your compassion, your creativity, your devotion, your time...find some way to share yourself so that someone else might know the love of God that is alive and shaping the world.

Find some way to share your gifts – and when you do, I guarantee that what you “get” will far surpass what is you think you want.

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