

“For the Common Good”

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Second Sunday after Epiphany – Year C

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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One of the holiday parties that Kim and I attend every year is a gathering with a small group of friends that includes a white elephant gift exchange. We have a small collection of interesting gifts on hand for these occasions. But this year, Kim talked me in to including something else. It was a dream catcher that I received from a church I once pastored at their going away party for me. I was reluctant, but said it would be fine to take to the white elephant exchange.

We started by drawing numbers and I got lucky number 1. I went first and got a really nice scented candle. Not bad for a white elephant gift! Well, after everyone had their turn, I got the opportunity to take someone else’s gift. Amazingly, no one had taken the candle from me. I thought about it and thought about it. I looked at that dream catcher, and started thinking about the people at that church I served, and the love

they had for me signified by that gift...and I took the dream catcher back.

When we got home I hung it up over our fire place, where it stayed for about a day until Kim noticed it and it came back down. It is now tucked away with my old records. But one of these days, I'm going to find a place where I can hang that dream catcher. I know it's a little gaudy. But it has sentimental value to me. So one of these days it will be hanging up somewhere.

Each of us has received gifts from God, spiritual gifts. And these are gifts that we can't give away like a white elephant gift exchange. Kim's grandmother was such a hoot when we opened Christmas presents. There was always at least one present Grandma Grossi would get where after she unwrapped it would say, "I know just who I'm going to give this to." We can't transfer or exchange the spiritual gifts God has given us. God has given them to us and there are no take backs.

But also, God expects us to use the gifts we have been given. To take those gifts and figuratively put them on the shelf or store them in some closet: it's not just rude, it's downright disrespectful not to use the

gifts God has given us. But it's not only that. God is counting on us to use our spiritual gifts. God didn't give each of us gifts just so we don't feel left out. God gave them to us on purpose, so that we would use those gifts.

The gifts that God has given us are meant to be used for the common good. They are not meant for our own self-aggrandizement or personal benefit. The gifts are meant to benefit the whole community. This also means that every gift matters. Whether your spiritual gift puts you out front or it is used behind the scenes, each gift is an important piece of the whole program that is the transformation of the world.

This weekend we remember Martin Luther King, Jr. who would have turned 90 this year. He is the leading figure of the Civil Rights movement. He has been lionized. He has a federal holiday recognizing his birthday. Some may be tempted to think that he alone brought about the historic advancements of civil rights for black Americans. But that is surely not the case. Yes, Dr. King was a truly great public speaker. He had the courage to express hard truths. He was a drum major for justice. But the Civil Rights movement was successful because of the

contributions of a multitude of people, named and unnamed. There is no way that Dr. King could have brought about the changes in our nation all by himself. Every contribution, large or small, made a difference. What made the movement so effective was that untold numbers of people did exercise their spiritual gifts for the common good in an organized and coordinated way. That's the only way social transformation happens, everyone doing their part for the common good.

These gifts that God has given us also ought not be categorized into a hierarchy. I was tempted to do that when I was first reflecting on this scripture in preparation for the sermon. Paul has this list of spiritual gifts and the first two he mentions are wisdom and knowledge. And I thought to myself that Paul must be implying that these gifts are more important or valuable than any other gifts, including the gift of speaking in tongues, which was creating a controversy in the Corinthian church. There were those who had the gift of speaking in tongues who got in their heads that this was a sign of their spiritual supremacy. Paul was seeking to squash that way of thinking partly, in my thinking, by putting the gift of speaking in tongues at the bottom of the list along with the

gift of interpreting such ecstatic speech and putting wisdom and knowledge at the top. But the problem with that thinking is to exchange one highly valued gift for another, so that those with the spiritual gift of wisdom or knowledge should be held in higher esteem than those who speak in tongues. That misses Paul's point. He stresses that all the gifts are important and have a role to play for the common good. Whatever your gift is, wisdom, knowledge, healing, working miracles, or speaking in tongues, they are all given by God, all important, all meant to be used for the common good.

Before Christmas, when I was a kid, I would write out a wish list for Santa and hand it off to my mom and dad. Magically, on Christmas Day, I would open up my presents and some of those items on my list Santa came through with. Somehow those wish lists to Santa transforms into shopping lists as we get older and realize that Santa doesn't exist. These days, around late November, Kim gives me her wish/shopping list. Then I take the list and go shopping in real stores. I prefer seeing what I'm buying in 3-D instead of 2-D images on my computer screen. But when I go shopping for Kim I always go a little off list with the

hope that the unexpected gifts I give Kim will give her greater pleasure than the ones she has told me to get. Sometimes I miss the mark but when I get it right then it's a win. The off list gifts are ones I have had to be intentional about. I have had to think hard about what Kim would truly appreciate, some gift that would make her life easier that she didn't think to ask me for. This, of course, requires me to pay attention to her so I can pick up on what her needs are. If I can do that well, then she's happy and is impressed that I've been paying attention. And that makes me happy too.

When it comes to our spiritual gifts, we don't get to write out a wish list, much less a shopping list. No, the gifts we have are assigned to us by the Spirit of God. And not only does the Spirit determine what gift we receive, God also willfully chooses the gift. It is not random. It is not like God has a spiritual gifts wheel where God spins the wheel to see which gift the arrow lands on for you. God has intentionally selected the gifts God has given you. It is not random.

God intentionally gave you the gifts you have so that, as you activate your gifts, you are enabled to fulfill your life purpose, the

destiny that God has in mind for your life. Failing to activate these gifts prohibits you from fulfilling your destiny, never mind the failure of contributing to the common good. Not only does everyone else benefit when you activate your gifts, you benefit as well. By letting God activate your gifts and you put them to use, the result is that you are living your best life, life at its fullest potential. And who doesn't want that? Don't we all want to live a meaningful life that makes a difference?

Maybe you aren't sure what your spiritual gifts are. That can be frustrating. It's one thing to get Christmas presents that you have in your hands, which you can unwrap and see what it is. Spiritual gifts have to be discerned. And I think it's possible that as we gain more life experience, or at different stages of our life, that latent spiritual gifts can move to the fore as other gifts move back. One way to discern which gift you have is to reflect on the different spiritual gift lists we have in Scripture, of which today's reading is one such list. Another option is to take a spiritual gifts inventory. You have two options I have given you in your bulletin insert. I encourage you to do one. Here's a third option. You could sit with this quote from Howard Thurman, the great

theologian and mystic, a man whose thought and writings have been influential to many people, including Martin Luther King. Thurman once wrote: “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” What are you passionate about? What do you do that gives you energy rather than saps your energy? Whatever that is, there’s a good chance that this is a manifestation of your spiritual gifts. So do that, not just because you enjoy it, but for the common good.

Let us pray.

God of many gifts: we thank you for the gifts that you have given to each of us gathered together this morning. By the power of the Spirit, activate our gifts and guide us on how to use our gifts to serve others. Make us come alive for your glory. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.