

2nd Sunday after Epiphany
January 20, 2019
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Spiritual Gifts Are for the Common Good

1 Corinthians 12:1–11 (NIV84)

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. ² You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³ Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

Dear Friends in Christ,

For three Sundays we are going to look at spiritual gifts as our epistle readings are from 1 Corinthians. Most of three chapters in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian congregation is about spiritual gifts. The believers in this congregation needed guidance in this area. One pastor described these believers as 4.0 idiots. They were like a student who gets A’s in every class but uses all this knowledge foolishly.

The believers in Corinth had been given many spiritual gifts. If you were looking for a group of talented, intelligent and gifted people to start a congregation, these were your people. But they had trouble applying their gifts to actual gospel ministry. Paul has to rebuke them about forming factions. Some followed Paul, some Peter and some Apollos. Some of them thought that they were better and wiser than the apostles. Paul has to rebuke them harshly for allowing and even boasting about sexual immorality in the congregation. They knew the grace of God and used it as an excuse to allow terrible sin to go unchecked. With all their wisdom and gifts, they could not settle disputes among believers but filed lawsuits against other believers. They were so wise and spiritual in their own minds that they looked down on other believers who were weak and new to the faith, placing stumbling blocks in front of the weak. 4.0 idiots is a good way to describe them.

Now, I am not going to say that any of us here today are 4.0 idiots. For one thing, I don’t know that any of us today have been gifted by the Spirit in the same way as those in Corinth. Maybe some here are at the B+/A-level. And I will not call us idiots because that is just mean. However, we all have to admit that we need God’s guidance in using the gifts he has given to us by the Holy Spirit.. Next week we look at the importance of your individual spiritual gifts and the following week we look at the chapter of love (1 Corinthians 13) and see how love connects with spiritual gifts. Today’s focus is on the fact that Spiritual Gifts Are for the Common Good

The Gift of the Holy Spirit is For Your Good

Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. ² You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³ Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

Last Sunday was all about baptism, Jesus’ baptism and our baptism. In baptism we are connected with all that Jesus did. His perfect life is credited to us. His innocent death is counted as our death for our sins. His

resurrection from the dead gives us new life now and eternal life later. We receive forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family as his heirs. And just as the Holy Spirit came to Jesus when he was baptized, so also the Holy Spirit is given to all who are baptized with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is given for our good.

Many of the believers in the congregation in Corinth had been pagans who worshiped many false gods. They bowed before statues. They tried to appease their gods with offerings and sacrifices. They engaged in immoral practices as part of their worship. The gospel of Christ freed them from their sin-filled past. Yet, you can imagine how they might think back to their past lives at times. Their foolish worship of idols that cannot talk might give them doubts about whether they are truly saved from their sins now. If I was so foolish in the past, how do I know I am trusting the true God now?

Paul comforts them by reminding them that they have been given the Holy Spirit. When they were pagans, they could have cursed Jesus of Nazareth as a weak man who got himself killed by the Romans. Their conscience would not have bothered them at all. But one who has been given the Spirit will not be able to curse Jesus without guilt and shame as the result. Instead, they can confess that Jesus is Lord. By that simple statement these believers have renounced their past worship of many gods. Only Jesus is Lord. By this simple statement these believers have evidence that they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, for without the Spirit, no one can believe in Christ.

The gift of the Spirit is for our good. When the real sins of our past trouble us, the Spirit points us to the real history of Christ to comfort us. Jesus really died on the cross to pay for sins. Three days later he truly rose from the dead to show that death, sin and the devil were defeated. Our past is forgiven by the accomplished work of Christ. The Spirit keeps us in the faith through Word and Sacrament. He is given to us for our spiritual and eternal good.

And the Spirit gives special gifts to believers for the common good.

The Gifts of the Spirit are for the Common Good

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. ⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

A small group goes camping in the forest. One member of the group is asked to gather sticks to make a fire. So he gathers a few sticks together, builds a small fire by his own tent and tells everyone else to get their own wood and make their own fires. He is not going to share his work with them. We would consider that person to be a selfish person. He is not working for the common good but only for his own good. Now, gathering sticks to make a fire is not really a spiritual gift but Paul does list some spiritual gifts for us.

Let's first discuss the gifts that were given at specific times in the history of the world. The ability to heal without medicine, the abilities to do miracles, the ability to hear directly from God as a prophet, and the ability to speak in languages you have never studied are such gifts of the Spirit. These gifts served very specific purposes at specific times in salvation history. There were lots of miracles at the time of Moses and during the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. But miracles were not an every day or every year or every generation occurrence in the Bible. The ministries of Jesus and the apostles had the most of these supernatural gifts of the Spirit as God was confirming the message of Christ, the Savior. But we are not to look for these types of gifts today. They have ceased because the message has been established already.

The other gifts Paul lists are still given today. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, discernment are just the ones listed here. We will see others in the next two weeks. Paul directs us to use such gifts of the Spirit for the common good.

Wisdom and knowledge are similar ideas. A person with these spiritual gifts has a great knowledge of the Bible. They may love to gain wisdom and knowledge from God's Word and dig into it often. Of course, all Christians have a desire to meditate on God's Word. Our new man wants to gladly hear and learn it. But some people have the gift of learning from God's Word more than others. Paul urges believers to use the gifts of wisdom and knowledge for the common good. This means that there must be a way to use such gifts in a selfish and sinful way.

Some may pursue biblical knowledge only for an intellectual pursuit and not for spiritual growth. They can name all the kings of Israel in order and how long they ruled but may have no concept of humility. They are great at Bible trivia but don't see their own need for forgiveness. A danger with great knowledge of Scripture is thinking one has nothing more to learn. This leads the person to individual study of the Bible only. They may withdraw from worship and preaching and group Bible classes because they don't learn anything new. Studying the Bible is a wonderful gift. Knowledge and wisdom in the Scriptures is a gift to be used not only for one's personal growth but also for the common good.

As our synod faces a shortage of pastors and teachers, we pray that those with this gift will consider using this gift for the common good in the public ministry. Encourage someone you know who loves to learn God's Word to consider training to be a pastor or teacher. A wise and knowledgeable Christian is a great asset to a Christian congregation and in families as this person shares their Spirit given wisdom to build up others in their faith.

The gift of faith is more than faith in Jesus as our Savior. This gift is given to all who are baptized. The spiritual gift of faith is to trust the Lord in everything and in every situation. Every believer has faith that Jesus has forgiven them by his death and will bring them to heaven because he rose from the dead. But when faced with terrible situations, not every believer will respond in the same way. The person with the spiritual gift of faith responds like Daniel did when told to stop praying to the Lord or he would be thrown to the lions. Daniel trusted God in life and in death. A person with this gift of faith today might lose their job and on the way home get in a terrible accident and during surgery the doctors discover cancer – and this person says, "God will do what is best." Such a person doesn't have the "why me?" moments but simply believes that God will do what is best for them always. This is great faith!

This is the kind of person you want around when your world is falling apart around you. Disaster will not phase them. They are standing on the rock of God's promises. But such a person must watch out for their gift to become a stumbling block to others. It would be easy to look down on others who have doubts, who get rattled by life's problems and who worry about things that you know God will take care of. Don't use your faith to belittle others but to encourage others, for the common good.

And that gift of discernment could easily be used to tell others how wrong they are, to show others how right you are and to look back on people's bad decisions and statements saying, "I knew you were wrong." Or in humility, we can help others see what is good and what is evil. We can help others see the deceptions of the devil. We can help others maintain the truth and stay connected with their Savior.

Every spiritual gift can be misused, often to serve our own pride. Christ Jesus, as true God has every spiritual gift. He has all wisdom, knowledge, faith and discernment along with every other good and perfect gift. Yet, he did not use these for his own good. Instead he used these gifts for the common good. He did everything for your good and for my good and for the good of the world. In his perfect life, he has covered our misuse of the gifts of the Spirit. In his suffering and death, Christ has paid for our sins of pride and arrogance. The love of Christ compels us to use every gift of the Spirit for the common good.

Amen.