

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
September 18, 2016

Spiritual Gifts: Examine the Body of Christ

21st Century Lessons from a 1st Century Church

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

I love the topic of spiritual gifts. It helps me combat the natural tendency to compare myself with others. It helps me overcome my fears, it lifts me up when I am in despair, it changes my view of my fellow Christians, and it encourages me that I have something to offer in God's great mission.

Spiritual gifts gave me a new view of the church, and I hope it will do the same for you today.



This view is not immediately recognizable because it is such a different perspective of the church. But it is God's view of the Church, a view of the Church from above. (Picture of our old church courtesy of WisconsinAerial.com.)

Have you ever walked into a group and felt, "I don't belong here"? We can walk into this gathering of believers whether in this building or elsewhere, and feel like we don't belong. We compare ourselves with others and we find ourselves lacking. I am not gifted like everyone else.

So the Apostle Paul comes up to each of us and says, "Let me give you God's view of the Church to take away your fear. I want you to know that you do belong here."

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

How do you know for sure that you are a part of the body of Christ? The Apostle Paul says, "Go back to your baptism. Whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free," life-long Lutherans or new converts, in poverty or very rich... no matter what appears to divide us, we have this in common. We all received the same baptism.

When you are afraid that you don't really belong here because of past sins or some feeling of inferiority, go back to your baptism. In baptism you have the promise both of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit working in you. In his Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, the Apostle Peter said, "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins... and you will receive the promised Holy Spirit."

You belong here because of your baptism.

He also mentions that we were all given the one Spirit to drink. This may be a reference to the Lord's Supper. It is also possible that Paul is going back two chapters to 1 Corinthians 10 when he reminded us that the Israelites in the Old Testament "all drank from the same spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."

How do you know that you belong here? It isn't based on what you do or what abilities you have. We all come to the same cross and drink deeply of the spiritual water of life that flows from Christ. In Christ the Spirit gives each of us the same gift... forgiveness of our sins.

Don't be afraid. From God's perspective through Christ, each one of us belongs here.

Ok, I belong, but I can easily feel like I don't have much to offer God's church. When I compared my gifts with others, I so often was filled with despair. But these words overcome despair.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.¹⁶ And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

You aren't a missionary who has dedicated his or her life to ministry. You aren't a pastor or full-time teacher in our school. You aren't on the Ministry Board or leading some organization within the congregation. Does that mean you aren't an important part of the body of Christ? Does that mean you are a failure?

Not by any means! Look at your own body. Every part has its function, and we are glad there are differences.

That's true in the church too. I am so glad that you have different gifts than I do. For me, when something breaks, these hands don't have the ability to fix it. I don't understand how electricity works. I don't know about technology. I don't have the desire or ability to garden. If the whole body were a "Pete Panitzke," everything would be broken, the lights wouldn't be on, this clicker wouldn't work, and we'd have nothing to eat.

The devil wants you to compare yourself with others and say, "Because I am not like that person, I am not an important part of the body." But God's perspective? "God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be." Don't despair. You have the gifts God wants you to have.

But the devil knows that if he can't get us by pushing from one direction, then he just pushes from the other. If he can't lead us into despair as we think of our spiritual gifts, he can fill us with arrogance so we look down on those around us. This is Paul's answer to that temptation:

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Isn't that interesting? The least "honorable" parts of our body we give special respect by always keeping that part of our body covered.

Looking at the Church from God's perspective allows us to do the same. The person who came to my mind this week was Kathy Bennett. She was a single woman who had some disabilities, but she was the friendliest, most upbeat person when she greeted you in the lobby. And she loved kids and willingly gave many hours in the nursery.

It could be easy to look down on someone who seems to be "less talented" than you. But here it is, more than 10 years after God called her home to heaven, and I rejoice in her gifts to this day. I needed her.

At the same time, I remember something my dad told me. "The cemetery is filled with people the world couldn't live without." When I begin to think too highly of myself, I walk in that cemetery and remember that God did great things through his people before me, and he will do so after me. My desire is only to humbly serve.

Paul closes this chapter with a list of some of the gifts the Spirit gave to the church of his day. Some of them are miraculous gifts God used to confirm the word (Mark 16:20). It comes as no surprise that once the message of the apostles was confirmed by these miraculous gifts, those gifts gradually died away in the church. Paul wrote:

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

We don't all have the same gifts. And this list of gifts isn't exhaustive by any means. They are only a sampling of what God has given his church, as is any listing.

On the last two pages of the worship folder, some spiritual gifts are listed in the order you can find them in the My St. Paul's database.

I'd like you to walk through that list with me and circle either: "This is me!" "Is this me?" "Not me at all!" Then give these last two pages of the worship folder to the Lord as an offering. We'll have a volunteer put this information in our database so that we can better find the gifts God has given to our church to help connect you to areas of ministry that you would enjoy.

Examine the Body to recognize your part in the Body's work.

- a. I enjoy organizing, delegating and motivating people to get a task done. (Administration)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

I think of Pastor Bonack who loves to help other people get involved or Pastor Kuehl who is a very organized individual. Is that you? Circle what you think applies to you.

- b. I can understand and share clearly the truths of the Bible. (Knowledge/teaching)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

This might be teaching one of your children at home or teaching an adult. Do you enjoy telling others what you know about Christ?

- c. I enjoy using my hands to fix things or make things. (Manual Arts)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

This is a gift that I stand in awe of. When something breaks, my reaction is to give up in despair. But when something is broke, do you see it as a challenge to fix?

- d. I am creative and enjoy making things of beauty at home or church. (Serving Arts/Crafts)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

I bumped into Jenni on Friday as she was decorating for the UNITY Fall Festival. She is involved in lots of ways in our ministry, but she mentioned that doing this decorating was refreshing to her. Does decorating your home, school or office refresh you?

- e. I enjoy writing to inform, encourage or entertain readers. (Writing)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

This gift can be varied. My college roommate would stay up late writing short stories. He had the gift of writing. I could never imagine doing that, yet there is other writing I enjoy. How about you? Is this you?

- f. People tell me that I am good at applying God's Word to the problems of life. (Wisdom)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

Do you find that people come to you at school or at work with their problems? You might think that anyone could give them good advice, but the fact that people over and over come to you may indicate a special gift of wisdom. Is this you?

- g. I look for opportunities to talk with people who may not be Christians with the hope that I can tell them about my faith in Jesus. (Evangelism)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

On Friday, I heard how one of our members is a coach in a community sports league specifically so that he can let his faith shine as a Christian leader. It could be evidence that he has the gift of evangelism. Evangelism is not simply someone who says, "Let's go door to door to talk about Jesus." It is much more the person who says, "How can I interact with people in my daily life who may not know Jesus?"

h. People often share their problems and look to me for advice. (Exhortation)

This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

This may be similar to the gift of wisdom listed above. But I also think of the individual in our congregation who nearly every week pats me on the shoulder just before I preach and offers a quick prayer for God to bless the message. Are you someone who just naturally wants to encourage the people around you? Is this you?

i. I am more likely to say, "It can be done," rather than, "It can't be done." (Faith/Vision)

This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

I remember as a farm boy dreaming about the farm I would have in the future. I realize that I had this gift from way back. Do you find yourself thinking about the future more than the past?

j. When giving, I really don't think about whether I can afford to give. (Giving)

This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

As Christians, we are all givers. But some of you give and give. I'm not saying that you have lots of money. It may be you have nothing, but you are willing to give someone else the shirt off your back. Is that you?

k. I enjoy having guests in my home. (Hospitality)

This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

Some of you just know how to make someone feel at home, no matter where they are. Is that you?

l. I would rather be a group leader than simply be a member of a group. (Leadership)

This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

At work or school, when a group is formed, do you tend to become the leader? Do people follow your lead?

m. I enjoy helping those who seemingly are ignored by most others around them. (Mercy)

This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

I am amazed how some of you are able to give so much of your time to help others. I think especially of two women who have “adopted” their elderly neighbor and help her out. Is that you?

n. I enjoy playing a musical instrument. (Music / instrumental)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

o. I enjoy singing praises to the Lord by myself or with others. (Music / vocal)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

These are two gifts that may be very obvious... either you’ve got it or you don’t.

p. I enjoy serving in behind-the-scenes roles. (Serving - General)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

I can see this in many of you. People can ask you to do just about anything, and you’ll do it. But if you have to take a leadership role, it just stresses you out. Is that you?

q. I find special joy in seeing a straying Christian come back to faith. (Shepherding)
This is me! Is this me? Not me at all!

When you are at an event, do you look for someone all alone? Do you go out of your way to help that person connect? Or if you bump into someone at the store that you haven’t seen in church for a while, do you easily ask if everything is all right and invite them back? Is that you?

This is not an exhaustive list. What do you think are the three most likely spiritual gifts. Don’t be afraid to include ones that aren’t listed here. If you enjoy working with wood, I’d call that a spiritual gift. If you can fix cars, write it down. If you enjoy gardening, write it down. If you are an accountant, a plumber, a painter or a candlestick maker, write it down.

Let’s wrap up by going back to God’s view of the Church from above. You and I belong here, not because of what gifts we have or what we do, but because we all drink from the same fountain of forgiveness in Christ. No fear! From God’s viewpoint, God has given each of us the gifts that he wants us to have. No despair! From God’s viewpoint, my gifts are different from yours, but not better or worse. No arrogance! But no matter what gift we have, if there is one ingredient lacking, it is all worth nothing. That’s what Paul takes up next week in 1 Corinthians 13. Amen.

My Next Steps This Week

- **Examine your part in the body.** Use the “Spiritual Gifts Discovery Tool” at www.StPaulMuskego.org and compare what you learn about yourself there and what you learned in today’s message.
- **Examine your heart.** Do you have the one element necessary to make you a useful part of the Body of Christ? Read 1 Corinthians 13 in preparation for next week’s message.