

Stewarding Our Spiritual Gifts

October 20, 2024

1 Corinthians 12:4-31

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, ⁵ and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ 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. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work powerful deeds? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Please pray with me: God be in our heads and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking. God be in our mouths and in our speaking. God be in our hearts and in our thinking. Amen.

Buried in a pile of boxes is an old trunk that my father once carried. In it are a few of my childhood treasures: Old cards and letters, high school memorabilia, trinkets from travels, pieces of diaries. Some of it is truly cringe-worthy as I recall my own struggle to figure out who I am and my place in the world. One of those cringy items is a patch, once affixed to a bright orange sweater, that spells out my name in 5-inch letters. It represents the year that my high school Sunday teacher, who also happened to be the wife of the wrestling coach at my high school, strongly encouraged me to be a mat-maid. I knew nothing about wrestling, nor did I care, yet there I was at every meet, assisting with the team and tapping the refs with a towel as the time on the clock ran out. I hated it, but I did it, for her...

Somewhere in the box is an award for making all-state choir on my first and only attempt after singing in the high school choir for a few short weeks my senior year. It was the highlight of a very difficult semester.

I keep thinking I'm going to go through that trunk and throw most of it away – no one else would want anything in it. But any time I return to it, it causes me to pause and think about those formative years and my journey to now.

Perhaps you have a box like this; a box of mementos that takes you back to a time when you were struggling to find yourself. Like me, maybe there is something in your box, whether tangible or imagined, that haunts you – a path not taken – an aspect of yourself left unexplored. That thing for me is an end-of-the-year award I received in 5th or 6th grade. I don't remember the criteria for selection or who decided it should be given to me, but it says: Dayna Kinkade, most likely to become an artist. Did someone, my teacher perhaps, see something in me that I didn't recognize in myself? Or is that the award you give a child when you can't think of any other validation to offer? I don't know. It was the end of the year, and that was that.

I say that it haunts me because I wonder who I might have become had it been teased out and nurtured. What was it, within me, that made that award mine?

It's so strange that I would ponder this now, more than 50 years later, and yet I wonder. I wonder: What and who formed me? Who am I? What do I have to give? What is my place in the bigger picture?

Do you ever wonder about such things?

I also wonder about the things we say to children. Recognition, to be seen, is a basic human need – but what do we see – what do we validate in kids. Too often it is beauty, or athletic ability, or intellectual performance and not often enough do we recognize the deeper gifts of personhood – like a tender heart – empathy – helpfulness – service – or creativity. We tend to shove those things aside to fit into boxes created by others... We become mat maids rather than artists.

In his book, "Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation," Parker Palmer shares the twists and turns of his career journey, which includes wrong turns to fit into roles not meant for him. He shares his search for his ideal vocation, which turns into his exploration of the ultimate existential question: "Who am I?"

Who am I? Have you ever asked yourself that question?

I want to share a quote from Palmer. He writes: "As young people we are surrounded by expectations that may have little to do with who we are; expectations held by people who are not trying to discern our selfhood but fit us into a slot. In families, in schools, workplaces, and religious communities, we are trained away from true selfhood toward images of acceptability under social pressures like racism or sexism. Our original shape is deformed beyond recognition and we ourselves, driven by fear, too often betray true self to gain the approval of others...Our deepest calling is to grow into our true authentic selfhood, whether or not it conforms into some image of who we ought to be. As we do, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks we will also find our path to authentic service in the world."

Another word for this authentic service is "vocation" – our calling. This word, vocation, comes from the Latin word, vocare, to call, and means the work we are called to by God.

Frederick Buechner, an influential author for my generation of clergy, wrote a beautiful entry on this word "vocation" in his book, *Wishful Thinking*. He said:
There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God...By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done...The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

Both men agree that when we find that place – when we listen deeply for God’s voice and heed that call – we find joy and life and energy.

Have you ever said “yes” to doing something that sucked the life out of you. That’s probably not your calling. For one day I had a job offering yogurt samples at a grocery store. Technically I was working for the dairy and the store didn’t know who I was and frankly didn’t care. It sounds like such an easy job – but I was miserable, and I didn’t, I couldn’t, go back. It wasn’t me.

Have you ever had that experience? When we are not true to who we are – we generally know it. We feel dread and have no joy in doing it. We might be able to do it very well – but if you consistently feel sucked dry it is **not** the place where your deep joy and the world’s deep hunger meet.

It may sound like I am talking about our professional lives or how we earn a living. But it is more than that. Those are just vehicles of vocation. Early in my ministry I attended a clergy women’s retreat. In a moment of vulnerability, one pastor in her 60’s shared that she probably should have never had kids. She did her best, she said, and she loved her children well, but it wasn’t her. She said, “It was what you did back then, you got married and had kids.” In other words – she did what was expected. She felt pressured into the box of someone else’s expectations. I wondered at the time if she was still struggling with her sexual identity and the fear of being her authentic self.

It is fascinating to think about all the components of our identity. Certainly, genetics is a part of this. When my friend and her wife decided to have a child they went to a sperm bank for a donor. It turns out the donor was a struggling college student trying to pay for school. He also had an appealing profile. Somehow his biological offspring found each other and he was able to meet 13 of his offspring – all about the same age. My friend said the similarities were striking, and many were creatives and musicians just like him.

When ponder the question, “Who am I?” we can consider our genetics, our personalities, our life experiences, our upbringing, our physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities and more.

Exploring our spiritual gifts is one way to investigate our true selves and our vocation and it is never too late to begin this journey of discovery. In the Bible we read about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians, the Book of Romans, and the Book of Ephesians. When we read these passages, here is what we learn:

- Everyone has gifts.

- One is not better than the other.
- All are important and work together, like a human body with all its parts, for the purpose of building up our fellow humans, promoting growth in the knowledge of God, and to become Christlike in our collective effort.
- They are not for personal gain but intended to be shared in the context of Christian community.
- They are experienced in relationship.
- And because they are true to who God created you to be – the sharing of these gifts bring joy. They become life-giving.

Your spiritual gifts are more than your talents and abilities. They are more than your personality traits and quirks. They are more than your gender or race or circumstance. Our spiritual gifts connect us to the big questions of life, like meaning, and purpose, and who we are as God's beloved.

We can begin to identify our unique gifts by studying scripture and engaging in spiritual practices that encourage us to listen for God's voice and to think deeply about ourselves. We can study the different gifts and when we recognize a gift in another person, we can name it and affirm it, to nurture and encourage that gift in our neighbor. And once we gain a sense of our own gifts, we can begin to serve in ways that bring us joy and energize us for service.

If you open your basket, you will find two things today. One is an invitation to do a spiritual gifts inventory and participate in a discussion about spiritual gifts following worship on November 3 – with the Reverend Mary Jacobs.

The second thing in your basket is a little mirror ball. Each piece of mirror is a symbol of our many facets as human beings. We are complex. We are unique. We are differently gifted. And unlike these cheap little mirror balls, we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

Today as you return to your seat from communion, or as you leave our worship space, you are invited to hang your ball on our tree. May this action be a symbol of your willingness to explore and share your gifts – for the building up of the body – and for the work of ministry to the world.

At the tree, you will also find the spiritual gifts inventory. You are welcome to take one and then discuss your findings at our special gathering with Mary Jacobs on November 3. If you are viewing, online, we can email you the survey. It includes the explanations of the gifts named in scripture.

This past week I completed the spiritual gifts inventory. I also did my Myers-Briggs personality type indicator, my enneagram, and an assessment by Working Genius. All of them helped me better understand myself and what brings me joy and energy and what drains me. All of them reminded me that I have gifts to share. All affirmed that the more we know about ourselves, the better we work together, because we need all the different gifts to be a functional body. The more we understand these gifts the better able we are to extend grace to one another and appreciate what each of us contribute.

I had to laugh when I tallied up my scores and wrote down my top three spiritual gifts. One of them was craftsmanship. When I read about this gift it said, "The Holy Spirit enables us to use our hands and minds to build up the kingdom of God through artistic, creative means." The description said, "You are either doing this, or you should be."

Maybe it's not too late to be that artist...

May God help us grow into our authentic selves – created by God – gifted by God – and called by God – to work together to be Christ in the world.