

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

Title: “Serving from the Heart: Spiritual Gifts”

Whenever September rolls around again, it almost has the feel of a new year. The summer holiday is over. Time to get back into school and sports and programs. Church events join in the mood which is probably why you received a small catalog this morning when you received your bulletin. A lot of opportunities to get connected, to build relationships, places in which to serve and spend time deepening your spiritual life.

That’s the intention of this new series we begin today: “Serving from the Heart: Finding Your Gifts and Talents for Service.” It’s not just busy work to which you are being called. It’s not about finding a way to hoodwink people into giving more time in service to the church. Rather, this series is about deepening our walk with God by learning more about spiritual gifts which God provides to every person who seeks to follow Jesus and then finding ways to use the gifts God has given us in service to others and for the glory of God.

The hope and prayer is that if you’ve never considered what spiritual gifts are about in general or—more specifically—learned what spiritual gifts God has given you that you will discover through this worship series—and the small group studies—some clarity in your walk with God. It’s really about serving from the heart of who God has created us to be.

I haven’t led one in some time but whenever I would lead a mission trip of some sort—whether with youth or adults—inevitably I would have at least one person—usually more—approach me as I announced the invitation to participate in this kind of service trip. The conversation usually went something like this: “Pastor, I’d really like to come on this trip, but I don’t have any skills. I can’t do plumbing or electrical or drywall. None of that stuff, so I don’t think I’d be very helpful.” I would think to myself that just the fact that this person is interested is a signal that the Spirit is prompting him or her, that here is a person whose heart is expressing a yearning to be useful and to serve with humility. So I would respond by asking something like, “Can you wear a pair of gloves? Can you hold a paint brush? Can you help cook a meal? Do you have a heart for people and a love for God? Can you pray? Then I promise you that if you decide to come you will find that there is always something for every person to contribute. God will lead you to something. Everyone has something to offer. I guarantee you will find a meaningful way to contribute.”

On one such trip a group from Owosso travelled to Slidell, LA to serve in the Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts. Betty Pudvay and I had that conversation before she decided to come along. Betty was in here 70’s, didn’t think she had anything to offer, but I tell you once she put on a pair of gloves and was clear what needed to be done she transformed into the project supervisor, hustling about the house we were working on, painting, hauling trash, cleaning. You name it she was after it, and doing it with joy

and compassion for the disabled veteran whose home we were helping to renovate after Lake Pontchartrain water and mud filled his house. She was changed by that experience. Her heart expressed a kind of Samaritan care that revealed her love and God's love for Peter Lebeaux. She was serving from the heart not from the head.

Like Betty sometimes we think we have little or nothing to offer in the face of the great needs in the world. Sometimes people think it's right that others should serve but it's not necessary for them to serve. Or sometimes I fear some think we MUST serve out of an obligation whether we like it or not, because it's a requirement of God that we put our nose to the grindstone, as it were, which puts us on the road to works righteousness, meaning if only we work hard enough we will earn salvation. All we have to do is work harder to earn God's attention, God's love and mercy, which, of course, leads to burnout because earning God's grace is an impossible task. We can't earn it because it's already a freely given gift. Jesus Christ has already revealed that God's mercy and grace is available to all without price, including not having to earn it through works. Christ has already taken care of it.

And yet, if you've read the Bible at all you know that Jesus did not stay up on his prayer mountain by himself spending his life in conversation with God alone, and Paul, once converted by the living Christ, did not hide away from the world. Both engaged the world and did, in fact, do good works and call on followers of Jesus to share in those works. Both of them served from the heart as God led them. The book of James says it well:

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? <sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, <sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? <sup>17</sup> So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. <sup>18</sup> But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. ...<sup>26</sup> For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead. (James 2:14-26)

So there is a tension between God's grace freely given and expressing the gift of God's grace freely given through visible works.

In all of this, I've watched people serve who initially jumped into a role of ministry with great passion but before long the passion fades. Some have even become resentful and angry serving in the church and other places for a variety of reasons which too often leads them to quit things altogether. Others have found their passion and they find joy and fulfillment in serving for years on end with no signs of burning out. What makes the difference? How can we find joy and fulfillment through the kind of service that really is from the heart and not the head? How can our service enrich our spiritual lives?

In the Apostle Paul's letters, he grapples with this question of serving and gifts several times. In his letters to the the congregation in Corinth, Greece, he was writing to people who lived in a cosmopolitan culture, steeped in the materialism of a harbor town that was built on a narrow strip of land called an isthmus. In ancient times boats were hauled across the stone isthmus on rollers to avoid the long trek around the southern tip of Greece, so Corinth was at the center of this commercial and military trade route. People who lived there were worldly, many wealthy, and worship of the Greek gods was part of their culture. So when Paul spent his first 18 months there, he had his job cut out for him as he ministered there. In those first 18 months, however, he--by God's grace--managed to build a congregation with Aquila and Priscilla with whom Paul worked making tents. Many were baptized and convinced of Paul's message that Jesus was the awaited Messiah.

But when he left that city, he later heard of conflicts in the congregation and he wrote to them concerning those conflicts. Among the disagreements in this congregation, some apparently were proclaiming their gifts were superior. Others might have gifts but clearly some were better than others. And so he writes to them in chapter 12 of his letter:

<sup>4</sup> Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup> and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

It's clear that all gifts are the result of God's gift and not the result of human achievement. It's also clear that all followers receive gifts and are called to use them for the good of the whole, the common good. Paul urges unity in the congregation and respect for the gifts of others since all are given by the Spirit and not acquired through human effort.

Paul also indicates how to understand the Spirit's activity in the church by his identification of the Spirit's work through the believers as "gifts." The Greek root of this word points to the nature of these gifts: the word for gifts is "charismata", and these "charismata" are the result of God's grace which in Greek is "charis". Therefore, because it is only the result of God's grace that we receive these gifts, I cannot boast that mine is superior to yours because like your gifts, God has given mine by the same Spirit of grace. I did not earn mine nor have you, but it is only through God's generosity that any of us received such gifts in the first place.

So what are these gifts? Those involved in the small group studies will look at these in more detail, but there are 13 listed in 1 Corinthians 12. Here's the list:

Message of wisdom  
Message of knowledge  
Faith  
Gifts of healing  
Miraculous powers  
Prophecy  
Distinguishing between spirits  
Speaking in different kinds of tongues  
Interpretation of tongues  
Apostleship  
Teaching  
Helping or Serving  
Guidance or Administration

In his letter to the Romans he lists others in chapter 12. In the letter to the Ephesians and in 1 Peter other gifts are mentioned. Nowhere does Paul say this list is exhaustive. That is, he doesn't tell his congregations that this is all there is and no more. Rather, <sup>4</sup>

...there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; <sup>5</sup> and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; <sup>6</sup> and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. <sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

So, God grants different gifts to different people. Someone is particularly gifted at serving. Someone else is a great administrator. Someone else has the particular kind of faith and confidence in God despite all odds that inspires others. Someone else can reach people in life-changing ways through teaching. Someone else has been given the gift of preaching. All are to be used for the glory of God and in service to others. It's the kind of service that comes from the heart, not the head. It's the kind of service that grows out of devotion to God, the kind of service to which every believer is called according to the gifts given.

One of Aesop's fable tells the story of a group of animals who excelled in their abilities. So, they decided to start an academy to train other animals to excel also. The only problem was that they assumed every animal could excel in every skill. So the eagle was put through a rigorous course in how to climb a tree and the squirrel was trained to fly, and a duck was trained to run. But the more they trained, the worse they got. In time, each animal became less able to do well the thing at which it once excelled.

So it is with the church. Christians are not meant to do everything well nor hold every office in the church. What God intends is that we discover our spiritual gift and use it until we excel in the use of our gift on behalf of the Body, for the common good.

What are the gifts God has given you? Do you know what they might be? Are you using them in service to others and for the glory of God? Are you using them for the common good? In your bulletin we included a short-form of a spiritual gifts inventory. Small group members will be using a lengthier and more comprehensive tool. But as we step into this faux New Year, consider spending time with God and this tool or the one used in the small groups to discover what spiritual gifts God might have given you and then consider using them out of joy and gratitude for the common good of the church. The hope is that we will be shifting to a gifts-based ministry model in this congregation because we believe every person is called to serve, that God has equipped every person with gifts to be used not to be hidden away and kept to oneself, but rather to be shared so that God's kingdom is built on earth as it is in heaven. What will you do with the gifts God has given you?

We are all a part of this glorious body of Christ about which Paul speaks. And when we discover our unique gifts and serve in unity and joy, the body is whole. The body is effective in witnessing to the presence of God's Spirit in this world and in that, we are all benefactors. We are all blessed when we serve as God created us to serve and when we recognize along with the Corinthians that none of us has all the gifts but when we serve with respect for the gifts of others--even as we discover and use our own--there is joy and unity in Christ's body, the church. When we're able to experience that, isn't it then that we serve from the heart, for God's glory and in caring for others?