

Gifts and What To Do With Them
 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a and Luke 4:14-21
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Good morning.

When a layperson is invited to preach, I think the congregation expects two things: announce the big idea up front, and get to the point quickly.

So, first, the big idea. As 1st Corinthians states, and as you can read throughout the New Testament, a big idea is that we have, *each of us*, been given incredible gifts from God, gifts that we could never *earn* in a thousand lifetimes.

And the point to get to, as is suggested by today's readings, is: *what are we supposed to do with the gifts?* How do we find the answer to that question? The interesting thing is that both today's Epistle and Gospel readings point to the answer to that question, although neither passage is normally thought of as having the idea of *gifts* as its central focus.

So, in thinking about gifts, I think a useful place to start is to distinguish between gifts on the one hand and talents or skills on the other. In one important sense, talent or skill is in many ways volitional. Talent and skill can be enhanced through study and practice. I can practice swimming. I can practice throwing a baseball.

And it's important to note that we get a choice about which skills to pursue. I can choose to be a ballet dancer and not a cook. Or vice versa. And to a great degree, the extent to which I develop a skill is dependent on the effort I put into it. Just like it says in Proverbs Chapter 14, in skill-building, "All hard work brings a profit..."

But gifts are a different thing. Gifts are something that are *given* to you. You don't get to choose. And, especially in the case of gifts from God, the gifts are freely given, and *there is nothing you have done or will do* that makes you *deserving* of them. Think, for instance, about salvation. Salvation is the finest and most wonderful gift each of us will ever receive. Yet, as we are told in Ephesians, "[B]y grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast."²

So, gifts are things that God chooses to give to us. How does that happen, exactly? And what are we supposed to do about it?

¹ Proverbs 14:23, New International Version.

² Ephesians 2:8-9, NRSV (all subsequent citations are from the NRSV).

Today's New Testament readings are not normally thought of as the "go-to" passages on God's gifts. Indeed, the part of 1st Corinthians that speaks most clearly on gifts was last week's reading. Today's reading is more famous for the teaching that the Church is one body in which each Christian is a member. And the reading from Luke is best known for its recounting of Jesus' rejection by his hometown at the beginning of his ministry.

But, taken together, the two readings do teach us some important points about gifts.

First, we get the answer to the question about how God gives us gifts. Gifts flow into us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, even the human Jesus received gifts in that fashion. The passage from Luke begins: "Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee..." As theologian Charles Talbert has written, the whole basis of Jesus' gift for ministry was "the anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit."³

1st Corinthians confirms this both in the passage we read last week ("... each is given the manifestations of the Spirit for the common good⁴) and this week ("...we were all made to drink of the one Spirit."⁵)

Second, it takes some effort to recognize the gifts you have been given. It's not like they arrive with an Amazon gift tag. Plus, gifts are not one-size-fits-all. That is certainly made clear in last week's and this week's readings from 1st Corinthians. Not everyone gets the same gifts.

Third point, while not everyone gets the same gifts, we *do* all get the same obligation to use our gifts. That is clearly the point of today's reading in 1st Corinthians: "...God has so arranged the body...[that] the members may have the same care for one another."⁶

The final point I want to make is what today's readings suggest to us about how we discover or discern the unique set of gifts we have each been given. The obvious beginning question is: Can you point me to some sort of list of things that are gifts?

And the answer to that is... like many other aspects of scripture study... messy.

There are several passages in the Bible that present a list of the types of gifts. Problem is, none of them match. Last week's reading suggested nine types of gifts: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues, and interpretation of tongues.⁷ But you can find other, non-identical lists in Ephesians⁸ and Romans.⁹

³ Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1988), p. 52. See also Donald G. Miller, *The Layman's Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke*, Volume 18 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959.).

⁴ 1st Corinthians 12:7.

⁵ 1st Corinthians 12:13. See also for footnotes 4 and 5, Kenneth J. Foreman, *The Layman's Bible Commentary: The Letter of Paul to the Romans, The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*, Volume 21 (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961.)

⁶ 1st Corinthians 12:24-25.

⁷ 1st Corinthians 12:8-10.

⁸ Ephesians 4:7-13.

⁹ Romans 12:3-8.

Of *course*, *denominations disagree* on the list and sources for the list. Seventh-Day Adventists assert there are eight different Biblical passages that define the list of gifts.¹⁰ The Catholic Church thinks there are only seven types of gifts and cites Isaiah as the one place to find the list.¹¹

Being an Episcopalian, and so being accustomed to thinking in terms of Scripture, Tradition, and Reason, I like the idea expressed in the Second Epistle of Peter better. The author of the letter tells us not to fret about defining and characterizing gifts because God's "divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness"¹² and that, "For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge."¹³

So, this circles neatly back again to this week's 1st Corinthians. How do we each discover the gifts we have been given? Two ways. One: listen to the Holy Spirit. That's really important individually. But second, and this is the really crucial point of my sermon today, *we Christians help each other discover our gifts!* Interact with your fellow Christians! Often, they will see your gift before you do – that is the 1st Corinthians message.

Think about all the opportunities the month-long government shutdown offered to learn about your gifts by interacting with others. Just to use the Catholic list, we all had the opportunity, interacting with our neighbors affected by the shutdown, to explore how we might offer wisdom, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, understanding, piety, and faith. This is a perfect example of how we can help each other discover the gifts we have each been given, and to make a collective contribution to God's purpose for each of us greater than we could have achieved by thinking about it on our own.

¹⁰ Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:9-11; 1 Corinthians 12: 27, 28; Ephesians 4:8; Ephesians 4:11-16; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; and, 1 Peter 4:10, 11. See <https://www.nadadventist.org/about-our-church/beliefs/god-gives-special-gifts-and-talents> .

¹¹ Isaiah 11:2-3. As described in <https://www.thoughtco.com/gifts-of-the-holy-spirit-542143> .

¹² 2 Peter 1:3

¹³ 2 Peter 1:5.