

GIFTED
(1 Corinthians 12:1-11)

I didn't plan it this way, but it turns out that today's sermon is more or less a sequel to last week's. I'm sure you all remember what that was about, but in case you weren't here, I said that God calls all of us to ministry, that baptism is our ordination, and that we answer God's call by living out our baptismal vows.

Today I want to take it a step further and say something about the tools and resources we have for answering God's call and living out our vows.

Let's begin at the beginning, with the idea that baptism is our ordination to ministry. It's easy to lose sight of that because most of the people we baptize are too young to do much in the way of ministry. There's a time lag between when they're ordained and when they actually get started in ministry. But here's the point: it would be truly frightening if we had a little water dabbed on our forehead and then got shoved out into the world to do ministry with nothing but our own resources to rely on.

Baptism, though, is more than a little water. We baptize with water *and* the Holy Spirit. You may remember in last week's gospel reading that when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came down from heaven in the form of a dove. Jesus' baptism is the model for all baptisms, without the special effects. And the New Testament makes it clear that the physical act isn't enough. Any baptism that doesn't include the Holy Spirit is somehow deficient. Authentic baptism includes the gift of the Holy Spirit, and it's the Holy Spirit that equips and empowers us for ministry. If you have been baptized, you have received that gift.

We mainline Protestants have a lot of confusion about spiritual gifts. Just think of some of the spiritual gifts Paul mentions in today's reading: working miracles, healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues. Not exactly the kind of things we're into or comfortable with – things we might even view with some suspicion.

It's not surprising that we're confused. The Corinthians were confused 2000 years ago, and in their confusion made a real mess of things. Their confusion and ineptitude and misuse of the gifts they had would be enough to make any of us a bit gun-shy when it comes to claiming spiritual gifts for ourselves.

So on the one hand we've got the New Testament's insistence that gifts of the Spirit come with baptism, and on the other hand we've got this cautionary tale from Corinth about how spiritual gifts can lead to all sorts of trouble. What's a Christian to do?

I suppose the first thing we need to do is overcome any misgivings we might have about claiming our own spiritual gifts. That's probably the most important thing we can do: to simply acknowledge that we all do have gifts for ministry.

Let me give you an example. This comes from another church, so don't worry that I'm singling out one of you.

Sarah baked pies. They were a legend in her church – not that they were the best pies ever, but because of what she did with them. Whenever there was a death in the congregation or someone was going through a hard time, Sarah would show up with one of her pies. She even remembered who like what kind, so her pies always suited the person and the occasion.

Maybe that doesn't seem like much. It's not especially glamorous. Sarah didn't get a spot on the back of the Sunday bulletin as "church pie baker." And as far as anyone knew, baking pies was just about the only gift Sarah had. She didn't heal people or speak in tongues or perform miracles. She just baked pies. But she used that gift as a beautiful and tangible sign of love and concern, support and encouragement.

You won't find baking pies on any list of spiritual gifts. It's certainly never mentioned in the New Testament. But Sarah turned her simple pie-baking gift into a spiritual gift. She didn't bake pies because she enjoyed being in the kitchen, although she probably did. She baked pies because she understood as a Christian that she was called to use whatever gift God had given her – and to use it for the good of others.

Or consider Joe. Joe was a peacemaker. He had been given the gift of reconciliation, which goodness knows most churches can use. After a heated church meeting, Joe would spend the next day calling folks, trying to keep them talking to one another. If peacemakers are blessed, as Jesus said, Joe was blessed and a blessing. "We can disagree," he would say, "but we have to disagree in love. Jesus didn't command us to agree, but he did command us to get along in love." Joe never actually held an official church office, but he had a gift and he had a ministry.

As I said, Sarah and Joe aren't here this morning. But if you look around, you'll see plenty of Sarahs and Joes – people who aren't looking for praise but who use their gifts in ways that make a difference at West Parish and in our community and in the world. Look around and you won't see anyone who doesn't have spiritual gifts that can be used in ministry.

If you've been baptized, you've received the gift of the Holy Spirit. And if you have the gift of the Holy Spirit, you have the Spirit's gifts, you've been equipped and empowered to share in Jesus' ministry.

So here's the question: What is your spiritual gift? Again, don't think in terms of something mysterious or esoteric. According to St. Paul, a spiritual gift is any gift – any gift – that can be used for the good of others and for building up the church, even something as mundane as baking pies. That's the only test: is this gift something that's used for the good of God's people. In other words, it's not the gift itself, it's how it's used. Sometimes baking pies is just baking pies, but sometimes it's much more.

The other thing Paul makes clear is that we need the gifts of everyone. As he says, there are varieties of gifts, and no one has them all. Think of a football team – the Patriots, for instance. Last Sunday it didn't seem they had any gifts at all. But even at their very best, no one player can do everything. No one wants Tom Brady returning punts, no one wants Randy Moss playing nose tackle, no one wants Steven Gostkowski throwing passes – for the simple reason that they

wouldn't be very good at it. Tom Brady doesn't have the gift of returning punts. He may be a great athlete, but no one can play twenty-two positions.

We need our pie bakers and our peacemakers – and our prophets and administrators and teachers and communicators and hospitality providers and musicians. We need them all because the more we have, the stronger the church will be.

It's a great challenge for a church to help its members discover their spiritual gifts – to discover those gifts and affirm them and cultivate them. Often it's easier to see gifts in others than in ourselves. So there are really two sides to the coin: discovering and owning our own gifts and helping others discover and own theirs.

In the end, though, it all comes down to what we do with the gifts we have and how we use the gifts we all have. So let me end with another story, one that comes from the Jewish Hassidic tradition.

Rabbi Zusya, a pious and honored sage, was lying on his deathbed, weeping. His students stood around the bed, not understanding why this holy man was crying. "Rabbi, why do you weep?" one of them asked. "Surely if anyone is guaranteed a place in the kingdom of heaven, it is you!" The rabbi turned toward his beloved students and began to speak softly, "If, my children, when I stand before the heavenly court, I am asked 'Zusya, why were you not a Moses?' I shall have no hesitation in affirming, 'I was not *born* a Moses.' If they ask me, 'Why, then, were you not an Elijah?' I shall say with confidence, 'Neither am I Elijah.' I weep, friends, because there is only one question that I fear to be asked: 'Why were you not a Zusya?'"

That's the question for each of us: Why were you not the person God intended you to be? Why did you not use the gifts God gave you?