

The Parable of the Talents Revisited: God's Gifted children

I do hope today's text is one you recognize:

MATTHEW 25: 14-15 (NRSV) *"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away."*

ROMANS 12:4-8 (NRSV) *For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching"; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness."*

Remember the music and comedy team, the "Smothers Brothers"? One of their most popular routines was "Mom always liked you best." For Christmas one year my sister gave me a T-shirt that says, "Mom likes me best." I still wear it.

Sibling rivalries are such fun! And that kind of thing is not exclusive to kids. Something like that was going on in the church in Corinth, and the issue was spiritual gifts. And it wasn't, "Mom likes you best;" it was, "God likes me best." "I have more spiritual gifts than you!" "Yes, but mine are more important!" They apparently had arranged the gifts into a kind of "pecking order". So, Paul wrote to them, and said, *"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body."* (I CORINTHIANS 12:12)

In all the texts that discuss spiritual gifts, one issue I don't pick up is an issue in the church today. In Corinth, the issue is **status**: who has the most gifts, or whose gifts are more important. **Worship** is the issue in the Roman letter. Paul's in a teaching mode and says the dedicated use of spiritual gifts constitutes true worship. At Ephesus the issue is **unity**: Paul urges the Ephesians to focus on the "one Spirit" who was the source of all the gifts.

But the question never arises *whether* any individual has spiritual gifts. It is an issue in today's church. People say, "I don't have any gifts." Paul is clear: **every** Christian is given some special set of abilities with which to fulfill God's call to ministry. Now, it may well be that you haven't identified your gift(s); and your gifts will change, according to changes in yourself and changes in the needs of the moment. But I promise you, if Christ lives in you, you have a gift of ministry! In all three texts, Paul emphasizes that spiritual gifts are given to "each one."

Let's be honest. Some of us don't want to find our gifts. Some of us have our priorities arranged so that things of the spirit are somewhere down the list—they're important; but, they're private. Worship, study, prayer and service in and through the church are simply less important than job, family, recreation.

That's not necessarily bad; in fact, there are times when those things *should* take priority. The secret is balance. One of the most beloved passages in the Bible begins, "*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: ²a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted...*" ECCLESIASTES 3:1-2 (NRSV)

Others have difficulty acknowledging and accepting Spiritual Gifts because of an erroneous understanding of humility. For most of us, it's easier to identify our faults and weaknesses than our strengths. From our earliest years we're coached not to brag, not to show off. Some of us find it hard to receive a compliment or a gift graciously. It seems arrogant to acknowledge our gifts and talents.

Paul frequently would say, "I can't boast, because it's not me, but Christ working through me, that does these things." And in today's text, "*6We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...*" In the original language of the New Testament, the words, gift and grace come from the same root; and, by definition, grace is something we can't earn or deserve. We can only choose, in humility, to accept it.

Some are reluctant to discover their gifts because the church has a reputation for finding people willing to work and burning them out. But that's a primary reason a spiritual gifts-based ministry can be so effective.

Let's take a look at what happens when we begin to discover, identify and use our spiritual gifts. When we understand what it means to be "Gifted to Serve" ...

- ...we learn that it is by God's grace and love, and not by anything we've done, that we receive these gifts.
- ...we begin to understand the spiritual dimensions of God-given gifts.
- ...we begin to understand that not only have we been called to a specific ministry; but also, we are fully equipped to accomplish it.
- ...we begin to feel value in how we serve God.
- ...we begin to be comfortable in doing the things we're gifted to do;
- ...we grow in confidence in the knowledge that we are using what God has given us.
- ...we begin to understand that when we use these gifts we help strengthen the whole church—the whole body.
- ...our work ceases to be "busy work" or burdensome; it takes on significance and purpose, because we recognize the difference between "church work" and "the work of the church".
- ...our motivation to serve changes and increases.
- ...we feel empowered in serving where God calls us to serve.

- ...we have permission to say, "No" to some things, knowing that God has gifted someone else to do those things.
- ...we begin to understand that we aren't supposed to do everything. *[Are you beginning to see how this approach to ministry avoids burn-out?]*
- ...we begin a new journey into a deeper relationship with God.
- ...we begin to know God in a new and deeper way.

Now that all sounds great; but, it doesn't happen automatically. We can't make it happen; but, it doesn't happen if we don't prepare ourselves through spiritual discipline. And when it does happen, it will happen within the context, directly or indirectly, of the community of faith: whether gathered or scattered.

In the New Testament, the only references to the Holy Spirit coming to an individual apart from the context of the church are to prepare that individual for some announcement or proclamation or witness. And Paul is clear: in Romans the gifts are given as the various parts and functions of the Body; in I Corinthians, the gifts are given "for the common good;" in Ephesians, the gifts are given "so that the body of Christ might be built up... as each part does its work."

I have this vision—or dream—or fantasy... a church whose only organizational structure is Trustees who see to the business and legal relationships of the church. The pastor and the elders would guide the spiritual formation of the body and tend to the pastoral needs. The deacons would take care of the building and grounds—kind of like in the New Testament.

If a specific need emerged, someone, or some group, would step up and use their gifts of ministry and take care of it.

Someone would have an idea for a new program for fellowship or worship or outreach or evangelism, and would step up and say, "I'd like to do this." And if the project fit within the values and vision and mission of the church, the congregational leadership would respond, "What do you need from us to make your project be of the highest possible quality?"

Funding would not be an issue, because people would give systematically and in proportion to their income; and people with the gift of generosity would exercise that gift.

The life and work of the church would be integrated into the lives of the members—into lives balanced between family, work, recreation, and community involvement. And because their lives would be immersed fully into the Spirit of Christ, their stress levels would be low, and their sense of peace and joy and fulfillment would soar.