**Living Church: Gifts**

**Romans 12:4-8**

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July 30, 2017

What is the best gift you’ve ever received or one of the best, anyway? Maybe it was an engagement ring or the “yes” when that ring was given. Or maybe it was a photo album chronicling your life or your family’s adventures. Maybe it was just a simple card when you really needed to know someone was thinking about you. What made that particular gift so wonderful? If I were going to guess, you didn’t love that gift because of its price. Rather, you loved it because it was particularly right for you. The best gifts are those that touch some deeper part of who we are – they fulfill a hope or connect to something we deeply cherish or meet an emotional or spiritual need we might not even have recognized was there. They are gifts that show that the giver really knows and understands us. They know what we value or what we need, what brings us joy and what fills our hearts.

Last week, we started a sermon series I’ve been calling *Living Church*. My premise is that we are living in a time when the church can offer an alternative to all of the negativity and anger that seems so prevalent in our society today. We have the promise of the kingdom of God – a community of love and acceptance, justice and generosity. Our calling is to do our best to be an example of that community in the midst of the secular world. We do that by living out the vows we make as church members – the vows to support the church with our presence, gifts, service, prayers, and witness. Last week, we talked about presence and today we’ll talk about gifts.

Of course, when we talk about the gifts we have to offer the church- which means, really, to offer to God and the world – we’re not talking about a box wrapped in pretty paper with a big bow on top. Rather, we’re talking about what we might give of ourselves and our lives that can help to further the kingdom of God. Often, we think that “gifts” just refers to our financial gifts to the church. And, of course, those are important. As we just saw, when we all pitch in financially, we keep the church running – from paying our staff to heating the buildings to ministering to our community and world. I don’t want to minimize the importance of financial gifts – but you’ll hear more about that when we have our stewardship campaign in the fall.

What I’m really thinking about is our spiritual gifts as well as the talents, skills, and passion that come with them. In the United Methodist Church, we believe that God has given every person gifts that help God do God’s work in the world. Each of us has characteristics that are vital to creating and sustaining a community that reflects the kingdom of God. Dan Dick, a United Methodist pastor from Indiana who has made his life work helping people recognize and use their spiritual gifts, puts it this way, “We are not gifted because of the church; rather, the church exists because we are gifted. We do not serve the church; we are the church – gifted by God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and called to live from our gifts in the world.”

But, what are spiritual gifts? Paul develops the idea of spiritual gifts in his letters to the Romans, the Corinthians, and the Ephesians. He often speaks of the community of faith, the church, as a body, reminding us that every part of a body contributes something to the whole. What we contribute are our spiritual gifts. In our scripture passage for today, Paul introduces many of the gifts – prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and compassion. There are many others Paul names in the other two letters – discernment, helping, healing, wisdom, servant hood – a total of about twenty all together.

The United Methodist Church website describes spiritual gifts this way, “Spiritual gifts are not our talents or skills. They are the grace of God at work within us, empowering us to match our deep passions with the world’s deep need. The gifts are given to individuals, but they are given to build and strengthen community and to meet the needs of those around us.”

Of course, over time, you will develop skills and talents as expressions of your spiritual gifts. For example, you may choose to go to medical school and learn ways of healing, but the inner drive to heal people, the natural, inborn passion for healing is the spiritual gift.

No matter what you do in your day job, you have a calling to offer your spiritual gifts to the church and the world. We need gifted people to shepherd our children, we need people who are passionate about missions to lead us in service, and we need people who are gifted in hospitality to welcome people into our church when they visit. So, what are your spiritual gifts – do you know? Have you thought about it? Sometimes, we know but we just don’t know we know. For example, you might say, “I’m a very intuitive person.” Intuition isn’t named by Paul as a spiritual gift but discernment is and discernment is the gift of intuition and insight.

Sometimes, we have gifts that we’re not even aware of. In his book, *Equipped for Every Good Work,* Dan Dick describes looking for Sunday School teachers when he was a young church intern. He asked the church council how teachers had been recruited in the past. “We just take whoever is willing to do it.” Unfortunately, that meant the church had a lot of changeover in teachers. He went on to develop a short questionnaire to help people determine whether or not they were "gifted" to teach. Through the questionnaire, he identified a group of people who had the gift of teaching though some had never considered teaching before in their lives. “The result was a core group of highly effective, deeply spiritual educators who stuck with education in some form for years, and most continue to this day.”

When you do work – at your job or at home or at church – that you’re not well-suited for, you can become bored or frustrated. Alternatively, there is a sense of joy and purpose that comes with finding our spiritual gifts and using them to further God’s work – the work of love, justice, abundant life, and peace. So, how will you plug in to that work? What gifts do you have to offer?

One way to explore your spiritual gifts is on the United Methodist Church website. At the top of the announcement page in your bulletin, you’ll see a link to a Spiritual Gifts Assessment – a questionnaire you can use to help you identify your own gifts. From that webpage, you can find links to a lot of other information about spiritual gifts, what they are and how to use them for the greater good.

Here at FUMC, we also have a survey that you can take to express interest in different activities in the church – everything from serving on the Board of Trustees to singing in the choir. We hope that this fall all of you will fill out that survey. You’ll find the link to that in your bulletin, too. Even if you’ve done it before, you may find that something else interests you and, if so, we want to know about.

As I said last week, church isn’t meant to be passive. We are a living, vital, transformative community. Ultimately, you will have a deeper, more satisfying faith journey if you find ways in which you can use your God-given gifts to make a difference in the world. Church ought to be a place where that can happen.

Jim Higdon has been a member here at FUMC for fifteen years, and he has been involved in a lot of different parts of the community, faithfully giving of his time, his money, and, especially, his spiritual gifts. Jim is going to share a little bit about his understanding of how we grow in faith through giving.

*Jim Higdon shared thoughts on discerning the difference between gifts and blessings. He mentioned that it is sometimes hard to see ourselves properly and that we should listen to others. Jim has worked with the Junior and Senior high youth in Sunday school settings for many years. He recalled sharing the story of Lydia, a Jesus follower who sold precious purple cloth and hosted the first home church, with the youth. In engaging the youth at the end of the lesson, one asked “Why haven’t we heard of her before?” Jim remarked, was this a gift given? Or a gift received?*

*(Please listen to the podcast to hear Jim Higdon’s comments in their entirety.)*

Thank you, Jim. Just like the best you have received somehow touched a deeper need or hope in you, God gives us spiritual gifts that we might give to meet the deeper needs and hopes of the world. May we each find those places in the church and in our lives where we can offer ourselves to nurturing, leading, comforting, and building the kingdom of God.

Amen.