**The Church in the Power of the Spirit**

**May 7, 2017**

**“The Gifts of the Spirit”**

**1. Introduction: Bible College Blues**

For the second week in a row, I’m beginning with a story from my time in Bible College. I went to Bible College with high expectations, thinking that it would be an idyllic place where brothers and sisters in Christ would get along with no problems. Boy, was I naïve! To be completely honest, my adjustment to Bible College was a bit difficult. I missed my family and friends. I found it hard to fit in at college and I was a bit lonely. One evening I was talking about my emotional state to some guys on my dorm and one guy said he had a solution to my problem. So, we went for a walk around the block to talk things over. Immediately, he launched into his talk, “I know why you’re feeling a bit down, you’re haven’t been baptized with the Holy Spirit.” I responded by saying that I thought that the Spirit entered the life of the Christian when they started to follow Jesus. He acknowledged this, but added, “You need something more; you need to be baptized with the Spirit.” He proceeded to tell me the story of how he was baptized with the Spirit and was given the gift of speaking in tongues. He then began to pray for me, that I would be baptized with the Spirit and speak in tongues. To make a long story short, nothing happening. No matter how hard he prayed or implored me to receive it, I wasn’t feeling it or speaking in tongues. He finally gave up and said, “Well, I guess you have to keep praying.”

I still remember the feelings of extreme discomfort that I had. I felt that something was being forced upon me that I didn’t really understand or accept. In a way, I felt like I was being spiritually abused. In retrospect, I look back on that event and observe that a well-intentioned Christian was merely trying to help me. The problem was that he was treating his experience of the Spirit as normative for all Christians when clearly it wasn’t the case. Unfortunately for some, negative experiences such as this might turn them off anything having to with the Spirit. It could also foster antagonistic attitudes toward charismatic Christians. My point in sharing this story is not to engage in charismatic-bashing, rather, I want it to serve as a lesson for all of us that the Holy Spirit gently works in people’s lives according to his will. He does not follow a formulaic, one-size-fits-all, process, instead, he deals with each one of us as individuals. He does not force himself into our lives neither does he make us feel uncomfortable or inadequate. And he never says that you need to have this *one* gift or you’re not really a Christian. This morning’s New Testament reading affirms that the church, the Body of Christ, is made up of a diversity of members who are empowered by the Spirit in diverse ways. Yet this diversity does not result in chaotic disunity since the gifts have a single source, God, and are aimed at one purpose, to build up the entire community of believers. The Body of Christ needs this diversity because no single member can do everything on his or her own; it takes the many members of the body to work together to do the tasks that God has given us.

**2. The Trouble in Corinth**

Paul’s discussion of *spiritual matters* in chapter twelve is part of a much larger discussion that begins here and includes both chapter thirteen and chapter fourteen. In the space of these three chapters he carefully crafts his argument to address a real problem within the church. We get some insight into the nature of this problem in chapter fourteen where he discusses two spiritual gifts: prophesy and tongues. Contrasting these two, he characterizes *prophesy* as intelligible Spirit-inspired speech and *tongues* as unintelligible Spirit-inspired speech (14:2-4). While both are spiritual gifts, Paul argues that intelligibility is essential for a congregational setting since people need to understand what they are hearing to be encouraged by it (14:4). Thus, for Paul, speaking in tongues without explanation or interpretation is futile (14:9). The remainder of the chapter outlines the proper use of tongues within the Christian assembly to promote intelligible order instead of unintelligible chaos (14:26-40). Chapter thirteen serves as a theological interlude between chapters twelve and fourteen where Paul locates the whole subject of spiritual gifts within the context of *Christian love.* Even here, the subject of tongues is prominent as he begins, “If I could speak in any language in heaven or on earth but didn’t love others, I would only be making meaningless noise like a loud gong or a clanging cymbal” (13:1). Finally, here in chapter twelve he places the gift of tongues and the interpretation of tongues within two larger lists of spiritual gifts (12:8-10; 28) in order to emphasize the diversity of spiritual gifts to his readers.

Paul’s argument in chapter twelve focuses on the need for a diversity of gifts in the unity of the Spirit and this makes sense considering the Corinthians’ apparent singular enthusiasm for tongues (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians,* p. 634.). One writer sums up the problem this way: “Paul is reacting against some Corinthian Christians who are vaunting one gift over another (especially speaking in tongues as the main gift of the Spirit), and in order to counteract that, he is seeking to put all “spiritual things,” especially the endowments of the Spirit, in a proper perspective” (Joseph Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians,* p. 454).

This controversy over spiritual gifts is just one of many instances of discord within the Corinthian community. A walk through the letter will reveal that the Corinthian Christians were divided over several things: leadership (1:10-13); lawsuits (6:1-8); eating idol meat (8:1-13); and the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34). What was common to all these problems was a sense of competition and superiority over others within the community; an “I’m better than you” attitude. In Corinth, some Christians were making use of their spiritual endowments with a certain competitiveness that was not helpful for the good of the community. “In response, Paul shows that the gifts of the Spirit are varied and that each is meant to contribute to the common good, but he insists that love must be the indispensable motivation for all of them” (Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians,* p. 454).

**3. The Diversity of Gifts in the Unity in the Spirit**

Paul’s use of language in this passage clearly communicates the notion of the diversity of spiritual gifts in the unity of the Spirit. Verses four to six feature three parallel statements which reinforce this message:

* There are *different kinds* of *gifts*, but *same* Holy Spirit
* There are *different* *kinds* of *services*, but the *same* Lord
* There are *different kinds* of *works*, but the *same* God, who activates all of them in everyone.

*Diversity* is communicated in a couple of ways. The term for “different kinds” (Greek: *diairesis*) means “diverse allotments,” implying that the nature of the gifts is diverse and that they are also given out in diverse ways. In addition, three different words are used to describe these spiritual endowments: *gifts, services,* and *works.* While these spiritual abilities are varied, they have a *unified source:* the *same* Spirit, the *same* Lord, and the *same* God. The triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit, constitutes the *one* divine source for the different types of activities carried out by Christians. The image of the triune God also provides an excellent model of three separate persons engaged in different activities while working toward a common purpose in complete unity.

The church is the place where this *unity* and *diversity* is present. The *same* God is doing his work through *all of us* (12:6). God empowers us as *individuals* with diverse spiritual gifts, yet it is for a common goal. Verse seven says, “*To each one* is given a manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*.” Every member of this faith community has something to contribute because God is working in each one of us. Yet we must realize that these gifts are for the benefit of the entire community. Whatever gift(s) God has given us, they are not for our own self-gratification, rather, they are meant to help, encourage, guide those around us. This is a message that the Corinthian Christians needed to hear because some were focused on certain gifts and the sense of the self-importance that those gifts gave them. This is also a message for the modern church where *ego* can be manifested within the congregation and the individual. Some may feel that their church is better than all others because their music, preaching, theology or miracles are better. Some pastors may feel that they’re God’s special person because they’ve planted or revitalized a church. Such spiritual pride is abhorrent because it ignores that God is the one who does the work through all of us.

While some of the Corinthian Christians thought that the gift of tongues was the most important, Paul shows that it is a part of a multiplicity of gifts through two lists within this passage. In two separate places, 12:8-10 and 12:28, he lists spiritual gifts and gifted persons:

12:8-10 12:28

wise advice apostles

special knowledge prophets

special faith teachers

12:8-10 12:28

healing the sick miracle workers

prophesy healers

miraculous acts helpers

spiritual discernment organizers

tongues those who speak in tongues

interpretation of tongues

Now before you look through these lists and try to find your gift, you need to remember that they were related to the Corinthian situation and as such were *ad hoc.* Paul did not intend for them to be comprehensive list of the Spirit’s gifting for all time. The original intent of these lists was to help the Corinthians to stop their singular focus on tongues in order to grasp the diverse ways that the Spirit was present among them.

In the first list, Paul again stresses the work of the Spirit within *individuals* by using the repeated phrases, “to one . . ., to another . . ., to another.” In both lists, he puts tongues and the interpretation last, not because he wants to belittle the gift, but to signal to the Corinthians that it is one of many gifts. The second list leads to a set of rhetorical questions in verse 29, which stress that no one individual has all these roles, just as no one role is played by everyone. *Is everyone an apostle or a prophet or a teacher or a miracle worker or a healer or a speaker of tongues or an interpreter of tongues?* Of course not! No one person can claim to have all the gifts nor is any one of the gifts bestowed upon all persons. Therefore, we need each other. Every person in this congregation is an indispensable part of the whole because we all have been gifted by the Holy Spirit.

Paul concludes his first gift listing with these words, “It is the one and only Holy Spirit who distributes these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have” (12:11). The Holy Spirit is sovereign and he bestows these gifts to whom and as he wills. Our task is to be open to the Spirit to allow him to lead, to guide and to fill us. And when he empowers us for service, we faithfully respond and minister to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

**4. Conclusion: Exhortation to Serve!**

We are the body of Christ and even though it is made up of many members it is one body (12:12; 27). We are a diverse group of people; we are different ages; we have different life experiences; we come from different cultures; we speak different languages; we are at different places in our spiritual journey. Yet we have all been baptized into the one Body of Christ through the Spirit (12:12-13). We all drink at the fountain of the Spirit. So, take your cup and fill it up – the water is free and it’s for everyone (12:13).

This sermon is your permission slip to serve in the power of the Spirit. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts; there are different kinds of services; there are different kinds of activities. Let’s not be constrained by the past or the status quo. Let’s not be satisfied with the “same-old, same-old.” I believe that with the Spirit the possibilities are endless. So, let’s be completely open to what the Spirit want to do among us.

What will it be like when the Spirit empowers us? I picture a calm contentment flowing into our lives because we will have a joy and a love for what we are doing. This past Friday, Sherri and I went out on a date and saw the movie *Maudie.* This lovely little movie was based on the life story of Nova Scotia artist Maude Lewis (1903-70). It was an inspiring story of someone who transcended the challenges of physical disability, a hostile family, terrible poverty and a difficult marriage through her painting. Maude Lewis didn’t paint to get rich. She never made more than $10 per painting in her lifetime, yet some of her paintings sell for upwards of $22, 000 today. When we got home from the movie, I googled Maude Lewis and found a short interview with her from the CBC archives. In this clip, she mentions that she’d like to get a trailer and do some travelling. However, she realizes that she’s too poor to afford a trailer. “I don’t need a trailer anyway,” she says. “I’m content in my chair. As long as I have a paint brush in my hand, I’m all right.” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIr8PAO0RSA>)

My hope and prayer for all of us is that as the Spirit works in our lives, we would be able to say, “As long as I have a paint brush in my hand, I’m all right.”