

Sermon Finance Campaign Week 3 November 19, 2017

Therefore, since Christ suffered as a human, you should also arm yourselves with his way of thinking. This is because whoever suffers is finished with sin. As a result, they don't live the rest of their human lives in ways determined by human desires but in ways determined by God's will. You have wasted enough time doing what unbelievers desire - living in their unrestrained immorality and lust, their drunkenness and excessive feasting and wild parties, and their forbidden worship of idols. They think it's strange that you don't join in these activities with the same flood of unrestrained wickedness. So they slander you. They will have to reckon with the one who is ready to judge the living and the dead. Indeed, this is the reason the good news was also preached to the dead. This happened so that, although they were judged as humans according to human standards, they could live by the Spirit according to divine standards. The end of everything has come. Therefore, be self-controlled and clearheaded so you can pray. Above all, show sincere love to each other, because love brings about the forgiveness of many sins. Open your homes to each other without complaining. And serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God's diverse gifts. Whoever speaks should do so as those who speak God's word. Whoever serves should do so from the strength that God furnishes. Do this so that in everything God may be honored through Jesus Christ. To Christ be honor and power forever and always. Amen. 1Peter 4:1-11

This month is our finance campaign and each week we hear someone give a witness about why they give. This month we've also looked at spiritual gifts - "charisms" - the gifts that are given to each of us by the Holy Spirit. It's been illuminating to look more deeply at spiritual gifts and why they're given to us. I wonder how many of us have taken it to heart that the Holy Spirit has given us specific gifts to use, to be a blessing to each other, and to reveal who God is, and to help heal the world. I grew up at a time when people went to church. Everyone I knew went to church because. It's just what you did. Discipleship wasn't a common word, and I shared a common Protestant assumption that believing in God was what it meant to be a Christian. That, and being a good person. I met Jesus Christ on a Lay Witness Mission weekend when I was 18 years old and ever since I've been one of His favorite projects. I assume I'm a favorite, anyway, because He has to spend so much time on me... teaching me, correcting me,

and revealing Himself to me. That common “Protestant assumption” I grew up with was that the church was a service and fellowship organization... focused on doing good and being good. But scripture invites us to a deeper understanding of ourselves as followers of Christ that’s more than doing good and being good. (I’m not dissing goodness.) But part of our life is Christ is we’ve been given charisms, or Holy Spirit-given gifts, to use to bless and help heal the world.

In this post-modern era there are lots of service organizations and innumerable ways to show up as a good person, so we need to learn new ways of being the church. We need to discern and call out each other’s spiritual gifts and use them to share the bounty of God’s blessings, to reveal God to others - to those who don’t know the love and mercy of Jesus - and to help heal the terrible brokenness in the world.

I know that numerical growth is a big measure of success (and if I didn’t remember that, the United Methodist “mothership” would remind me). But it can’t be the only measure of us as the Body of Christ. I think the measure of our success or viability (which is the word I prefer because it means aliveness) is that we share a common understanding of ourselves as the thriving and growing Body of Christ: each of us a part of His body, each of us accepting and refining our Holy Spirit-given gifts, and using them in concert (as the Apostle Paul counseled the early church to act as one body). Let us be measured by how we use our charisms, our Spirit-gifts, to act as the arms and legs and ankles and wrists and ears and the nose of the one Body of Christ, and by how we call out each other’s gifts... so that recognize Jesus in our midst; and that we take every opportunity to serve others with humility, gentleness, and genuine love; and that we invite others to experience with us this holy and purpose-full life.

I think this is a newish invitation from the Holy Spirit. Or perhaps not a new idea, since the Apostle Paul wrote about it, and Peter, Jesus' first disciple testified to it, but an idea whose time has come. It may seem like I am preaching to the Choir. You may be thinking to yourself, "I already know my spiritual gifts, and how use them to reveal Jesus, and to bless my brothers and sisters in Christ. I already use my Spirit-gifts to help heal the world... and I learned all this charism-stuff in Christian preschool." If this is what you're thinking, I invite you to take a short nap. But if you're like me and you're still learning and excited about the idea that within each of us has a page or two of the blueprint of the Body of Christ, and that together our pages reveal God, and bless us beyond our wildest dreams, and help heal the world... then please... stay awake.

This morning's scripture is a letter attributed to Peter, written to the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia. Peter was uneducated and ordinary, a fisherman, and yet Jesus called him "the rock", and identified him as the one on whom Jesus would build His church. Once Jesus invited Peter to walk with Him on the surface of the Sea of Galilee, and Peter did walk on the water, briefly. When he realized what he was doing Peter freaked out and sank. Jesus pulled him up out of the water and asked Peter, "Why did you doubt?" This pattern of Peter's starts and stops as a disciple, his boldness and his cowardice, is told in several gospel stories. Peter was, like me, like you, one of Jesus' favorite projects.... gifted and flawed... a work in progress. He wrote to the churches, "You have already wasted enough time... doing what unbelievers do." I believe that's his message for the church today.

The churches at that time were under the Roman Empire (which was both dismissive and hostile to Christianity) and Christians were trying to live in this alien

culture as faithful disciples. Peter encouraged them to see themselves as pilgrim communities, to understand their suffering in light of Jesus' suffering for them, and to develop and use their charisms, their Spirit-gifts, to help them survive and thrive in an unfriendly and unsupportive environment. Peter reminded them that they had residence in two different worlds, the Christian life of love and service, and the Roman Empire (known for "violence, oppression, cruelty, the abuse of power and sexual insanity"). Peter warned the churches that without disciplined spiritual practices of prayer, service, unselfish giving, and love (which he said "covers a multitude of sins") Christian culture would be shaped and coopted by the dominate culture. Without dramatizing or exaggerating the similarities between Peter's time and ours... but there they are. Like the early churches we're trying to live as disciples of Jesus Christ in a growing culture that's disinterested and hostile, and like the early churches we need to share the bounty of our gifts, including love, kindness, and forgiveness, with each other. Instead of criticizing each other we need to see ourselves as the Body of Christ; each of us gifted and unique... each of us a facet of the Spirit's gifts. And together we'll more powerfully reflect His love for all the world.

In his letter, Peter was imagining the Parousia, the end of time when Christ returns. He wrote to the churches, "The end of everything has come." His letter was encouragement and advice to churches living, as we do, in "the already and the not yet"; that is, the Kingdom of God that has begun and it is also not yet here. It can be a painful place to be, these in-between times, and Peter was longing for an end to the waiting. His advice in the meantime was, "Therefore, be self-controlled and clearheaded so you can pray. Above all, show sincere love to each other, because love brings about

the forgiveness of many sins. Open your homes to each other without complaining. And serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God's diverse gifts."

I didn't choose this scripture for today, it chose me. I was following leads, reading scripture and commentary about spiritual gifts, which led me to Peter's letter. Peter believed that to survive as a pilgrim community, which is not the predominate culture, but sojourners - travelers bound for somewhere else - was to be disciplined and focused disciples of Christ, and to use all the gifts of the community, both to build it up, to strengthen and bless it, and to reveal Christ to those on the outside. His message was that we are to serve each other according to the charisms we've received, and to be good managers of these diverse gifts. We are given Spirit-gifts for our joy and consolation; so that we see Jesus in our midst; so that we can reveal Christ's light in the darkest places; and so we can help heal the world.

The Apostle Paul wrote about God's diverse gifts, too, with an emphasis on the gift everyone of us has received from God - the gift most to be desired - love. I believe that as we recognize and "call out" each person's gifts in the community, we'll find ourselves growing closer in love to each other and to Jesus Himself. And I believe that naming our charisms, and naming each other's Spirit-gifts, is necessary for our growth and vitality. God gives us Spirit-gifts and we use them to build God's kingdom, and God gives us more gifts and we use them to bless others, and God gives us more gifts... and the gifts and the blessings create new bonds of love between us, and between us and Jesus, and between us and the world. We are blessed in order to bless; we are given in order to give.

During past finance campaigns I've used the words "stewardship campaign" and focused on all kinds of gifts and giving, in order to avoid the vulgar topic of asking for money. Now I understand money as a gift, and generous giving as a charism, a Holy Spirit-given gift. Generous giving reflects the generous giver, God. In all of our giving God is glorified and God's Kingdom revealed.

The first Sunday in Advent, December 3rd, we will dedicate our financial pledges for the coming year. As a congregation we tithe (we give 10% of our income) to the local and global ministries of the United Methodist Church. Our giving combines with the giving of other United Methodist Churches as we work together as the Body of Christ. And as with all of our Spirit-gifts, our financial giving reveals God, blesses others, and helps heal the world.

There are lots of spiritual gifts resources online, and I have a simple inventory if you'd like a copy. I think one of the best ways to discern or realize a charism is to ask your sisters and brothers in Christ, "What Spirit-gifts do you see in me"? Or "How is God revealed in me?" And one of the best ways to encourage and build up a brother or a sister is to tell them what charisms, what Spirit-gifts, you see in them. Lafayette United Methodist Church is blessed with an abundance of gifts... and all of them reflect the Giver, God. Amen.