

Discerning the Spirit

Joe Roos

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I Corinthians 12:4-25

Every night for well over a year, Anjali wants Cheri or me to read her two Bible stories before she goes to bed—one from a very simple children’s Bible and the other from a more thoughtful and detailed children’s perspective. Nothing ever gets in the way. It can be late or she may be tired or not feeling well, but she always wants her two Bible stories. But on Good Friday she wanted me to tell one additional story—the Easter story, so she could understand it better. She was present through all the readings of the Matthew passion story on Maundy Thursday and I think she simply wanted to get a clearer idea of what was going on there, why we gather as a church to hear the story and why Easter is so important. I was, of course, very happy to oblige, but I said I wanted to tell the story in two parts—the first Friday night and the second Saturday night.

She listened intensely to me, almost never taking her eyes off of mine. The Friday night story was, of course, the sad part, beginning with Jesus entering Jerusalem and ending with Jesus dead in the tomb. But, I reminded her, the Easter story doesn’t end there and that we would hear the rest tomorrow night. Soon she fell asleep. On Saturday I completed the story, how Jesus came back to life and how that has been such good news to people ever since. I added that in some way that none of us can probably ever fully understand that Jesus’ death and coming back to life somehow makes it possible for us to live in God’s way and that she can choose to live in God’s way just like mommy and daddy have chosen to do, too. I asked her if she understood and she said she did, but there was still a quizzical look in her eyes. I asked her if she had a question and she said she did. She wanted to know where the Easter bunny comes in.

All day she had been preparing for the visit of the Easter bunny overnight. Just before climbing into bed she placed two carrots for the Easter bunny on the arm of our sofa, just inside the front door, certain that this furry traveler would need refreshment by the time she made it to our house. I responded to her question by saying that the Easter bunny is a fun story and I’ll bet it will leave a basket for her the next morning. But, I

said, the Easter bunny really has nothing to do with the Easter story of Jesus and that Jesus' story is the really important one. I could tell that I wasn't very convincing. Sure enough the next morning those two carrots were gone and a basket of goodies was left in its place. I reminded her again that the Easter bunny is great fun, but the really good part is the Easter we will celebrate in church later in the morning.

But later that day, I was reading something from Anne Lamott that made me wonder whether Anjali's thoughts about Easter may be closer to the truth than mine. Lamott wrote: *"I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion...I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside an open tomb: everlasting life and a basket full of chocolates."* That sounded pretty good to me. I must admit that I like them both about the same!

I also appreciated what Lamott went on to say: *"I hate it that you can't prove the beliefs of my faith...Darkness is our context, Easter's context; without it you couldn't see the light. Hope is about choosing to believe this one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak [stuff] anyone can throw at us."* Indeed, we gather together here at Hyattsville Mennonite because this truth is so big not one of us is capable of understanding it alone. We need each other to understand the whole picture and we need each other to collectively be Christ's body here on earth, trying to show that love of Christ is bigger than anything else that can be thrown our way—violence, injustice, pain and death.

Today is the first of two gift discernment Sundays, the time in which we try to perceive the gifts of God in each other and within our own selves and to discern how those gifts might fit together for this next year to make us a functioning, energetic, living presence of the body of Jesus. As we begin that task, that joyous task, this morning, I want to offer a few reflections on discerning the Spirit among us.

The New Testament letter we call I Corinthians, from which we just heard read, is actually Paul's second letter to the Christians in Corinth, Greece. In chapter 5 he refers his readers to an earlier letter. In this second letter he is responding to four questions that have come to him from these Corinthians by messenger—the postal system of his day. One question concerns marriage, singleness and divorce; another food offered to idols; a

third involves financial offerings to the Jerusalem church. With today's passage, he responds to a question concerning spiritual gifts.

The Greek word for gift, *charismata*, has its root in the word *charis*, which means "grace" or "unmerited favor." Karl Barth describes spiritual gifts as "gifts of grace to the community of believers." The gifts of the Spirit, which we begin to discern among us today, are truly God's grace to our church, Hyattsville Mennonite.

It seems that spiritual gifts have become a divisive issue among the Christians at Corinth. Some gifts, especially speaking in tongues, are honored more than other gifts and still other gifts are seen as inferior. It should not be surprising that speaking in tongues is regarded so highly. It is, after all, the first gift that the Spirit poured out on the church at Pentecost. But in today's epistle, Paul brings a corrective to their assumptions and begins to weave his theology of spiritual gifts.

Paul begins his argument by asserting that "*there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; there are varieties of activities, but the same God.*" I tend to agree with commentators who say that the Greek word translated into English as "varieties" is probably better translated as "distributions." "Varieties" emphasizes the differences between the gifts themselves while Paul's point is more how the gifts are being apportioned or dealt out. So let's say there are distributions of gifts, of service and of activities, but always the same Spirit.

Paul adds that each and every person in the community has been given a "*manifestation of the Spirit*" and proceeds to list several gifts by name. The specific gifts being named in the first part of chapter 12—wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues—are not important to his point. His list of spiritual gifts in Ephesians and Romans, for example, are different than this list. What is important is that each person in the community has been gift-anointed by the Spirit and that these gifts have been distributed throughout the entire community.

After establishing that the distribution of gifts come from one and the same Spirit, Paul turns to the larger problem with gifts the Corinthians are having, namely what gifts are most important, a kind of pecking order of gifts. Paul made three points in confronting any exaggerated opinions of self-importance when it comes to gifts.

First, he said that the full diversity of gifts is not only a desirable quality, it is necessary for the Body of Christ to be fully what God intends it to be. In fact, the body is incomplete without all the parts up and running. *“The body does not consist of one member,”* he writes, *“but of many...If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were of hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body.”* That’s the first thing important for us to remember as we discern the gifts of the Spirit among us. We should take more than just a couple of quick minutes to jot down the name of a few folks that pop into our minds. We should also not just choose a couple of things to put down about ourselves that feel easy and comfortable to do. If we are going to have the kind of diverse and fully functioning Body of Christ that Paul preaches about, we need to engage in careful and prayerful discernment about our sisters and brothers and honestly discern what we see and hear about what this body needs. And we should also be willing to risk putting ourselves out there and volunteer not just for something that may be our easiest place to offer our gifts but also those places that we may feel emerging within us, areas God may be stretching us and nudging us to explore more deeply.

Second, every one of us has a God-anointed gift that is of intrinsic and necessary value to the life of the whole Body. Paul writes: *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.”* Paul denounces quite strongly any sense of the hierarchy of gifts in the Body of Christ. In fact, he points out, those parts of the body “that seem to be weaker”—I repeat ‘that seem to be weaker’—are really indispensable and demand greater respect. We discussed together before, in different contexts, how each community of believers has its own areas of strengths and weaknesses, its own special call. We’ve acknowledged that ministry and service seem to be our strongest charism with the building and maintaining of community not far behind. But we have also acknowledged that spirituality and prayer and the contemplative life are weaker

among us. Do we subconsciously have a hierarchy of gifts among us where some gifts—like ministry leadership or pastoral gifts—are valued more highly than other gifts—like contemplative prayer or a more pietistic spiritual orientation? I say subconsciously because I do not overtly see that operating among us, but might it subconsciously operate among us nonetheless as we discern gifts in our midst? All of us should try to be especially sensitive to the gifts that are among us that may seem weaker because they express gifts that are not always valued among us with great esteem.

Finally, God's Spirit has so distributed gifts throughout the body, in part, so that we may have equal care for one another. Again, Paul writes: *"God has so arranged the body, given the greater honor to the inferior members, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another."* True discernment of gifts and caring for one another go hand in hand. Also, give that careful consideration as you go about your discernment of the Spirit's gifts among us this week.

As you can see, gift discernment is not meant to be a quick and casual exercise among us. If you are ready to offer your discernment this week, by all means go ahead and fill out the form in your bulletin today. But also feel free to take this week to prayerfully consider what you see among your brothers and sisters and what you perceive within yourself. That's why we've given gift discernment two full weeks this year. For Paul, gifts come from God's Spirit. We could even say that they *are* the Spirit making itself tangibly present in the multiple and diverse gifts of the members of the body, this Body of Christ known as Hyattsville Mennonite Church.