

Gifts at Corinth and Hyattsville

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I Cor. 12: 1-11
I Cor. 12: 12-19
I Cor. 12: 20-31

Gift discernment Sunday can be tricky here at Hyattsville Mennonite. Not because people don't have gifts to offer, but because there are so many. Over the years, we have experimented with lots of different ways to encourage people to share their gifts. One year committee chairs acted out funny infomercials to entice people to join their committees. Another year, we had extremely serious and spiritual explanations about what it takes to run this congregation.

If you have been around a few years, you will remember the job fair in the fellowship hall with giveaways. If you visited every booth, from the trustees to adult ed to the hospitality committee and more and got your card stamped, you got the ultimate prize — a cinnamon roll.

Over the years, my sense has been that people here know how to offer their gifts as well as identify the gifts of others. Until I witnessed Kristin, struggling, **publicly**, the past few Sundays to find the formula for her gifts. I guess some of us still have some work to do to understand this whole business of gifts and discernment.

When thinking about spiritual gifts, we often start with Paul's words to the church at Corinth.

Only two of the letters that Paul wrote to the church at Corinth remain, but we can tell that this church had issues, a lot of issues. (Biblical scholars who study I and II

Corinthians say that it is clear that Paul wrote at least two other letters to the church as well, but they are lost. Also missing are the letters that the church wrote to Paul.) From these letters, and what we know from history, we can piece together what must have been going on in the church at Corinth.

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, not unlike Washington. People from all over the world and indeed from many religious traditions, lived there. The congregation was made up mostly of converts, not people born Jewish who became Jesus followers. These were people not all that familiar with the ways of being church.

The church contained well-respected and prominent people like Erastus, the city treasurer. Paul sends greetings to the leaders in the church: Prisca, Aquila, Stephanas and others. But it is thought that most of the people are not rich or powerful at all. There are probably a number of slaves in this congregation. So when Paul says *in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free* it really means something.

Which is perhaps where the problems begin. There is a power imbalance that the leaders do not know how to address. There are educational and economic differences. Elsewhere in the letter Paul addresses issues with gossip, sexual immorality and infighting between groups in the congregation. It seems like they just don't get what it means to be humble servants of the Lord.

What a difference from us, here at Hyattsville Mennonite. Humble? We specialize in that as Mennonites. And yet strangely we are all important. There are more graduate degrees in this group than on some college faculties.

We have a *bit* of economic diversity, but not nearly as much or as wide as the church in Corinth. We may be accused by some of sexual immorality, but it is not dividing us as a congregation nor separating us from the love of God. As Mennonites, we try to avoid conflict as much as possible so the fighting, at least within the congregation, is kept to a minimum. Is this word from Paul really for us?

Paul's instruction remains powerful across miles and centuries. Imagine being part of this struggling congregation in Corinth. They hear preaching about healing. They hear promises that "we don't have to be bound by how this world operates" and yet they remain stuck in the same old patterns of domination by the powerful and those with money. As chapter 12 begins, it sounds as if they don't trust each other in terms of their spiritual experiences.

Paul tries everything in this portion of the letter to get through to these people. He describes the different gifts that are needed in the congregation. Preaching, teaching, healing, faith, wisdom, speaking in tongues, understanding what is being spoken. Granted not all of these are gifts we actually see the need for here at Hyattsville. We might add a few substitutes to the list, like the gifts of listening, providing hospitality, networking, seeing artfully...

But he makes his point. There are a lot of different skills that are needed, and one is not more important than the other. And just to make sure that the people with education and those without, the people with money and those with little, the people who have been there a while and those who just arrived — to make sure all understand the message, Paul uses a metaphor that everyone is familiar with.

There can be no dispute here; the body has many parts and all are needed. You can almost hear a self-important Corinthian say, “Yes, I **see** issues clearly and you **sniff** out trouble. We are different, but complementary that way. And Fortunatus and Achaicus do make a good team as hand and foot. I think we got it, Paul.”

But Paul doesn't stop there.

Paul dares to insinuate that even the body parts that we are ashamed of, that we cover up, are important. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* says it this way — *the "lower" part (is) more basic, and therefore necessary. You can live without an eye, for instance, but not without a stomach. When it's a part of your own body you are concerned with, it makes no difference whether the part is visible or clothed, higher or lower. You give it dignity and honor just as it is, without comparisons. If anything, you have more concern for the lower parts than the higher. If you had to choose, wouldn't you prefer good digestion to full-bodied hair?*

Peterson's paraphrase makes a point, but it is fairly polite. I sometimes imagine that Paul was actually talking about the other parts that are also really important that we **do not** want to talk about in church. You know the parts, those used for pleasure and reproduction. We don't flaunt these, at least in church, but let's face it, they are necessary. Where would we be without them? All parts of the body are blessed in Christ.

For Mennonites, these unmentionable parts might be equivalent to the gifts of financial or business acumen. We need people who know how to deal with money, who

are smart about how the world runs, but in the past (and perhaps even today) we have not always given these gifts the respect they deserve.

Jesus was poor. And with the Catholic Church we might say that “God has a preferential option for the poor.” We derive from all this that we might want to be suspicious of people with money or the gifts of dealing with money. But knowing how to handle money, how to make money, make it multiply, how to give it to others, these are gifts that are needed in the church.

But the people in the Corinthian church struggle not only with economic issues of inequity. As citizens of the Roman Empire, they are part of a system of hierarchy. It is how one lives and survives. Some of the congregation is at the top of the ladder, but most live on the bottom rungs.

Paul writes earlier in this letter about the situation surrounding communion in the community. It seems they are replicating the empire even at the Lord’s Table. Some get a great meal and the rest are left to pick up the crumbs. And now the hierarchy of empire is affecting how they share their gifts and do the work of the church as well.

Paul makes it clear that the church is different than the Empire. In Christ’s body, everyone is important and all are needed. There is not a hierarchy that separates the elite from the riffraff. All are elite, all are riffraff or rather none are. After making his case for particular gifts, after trying out this new body metaphor, he retreats to what may be more of an empire approach, assigning roles to people.

The NRSV translation, as well as the inclusive language translation that we heard this morning, list these jobs as if this is a chain of command, *1. apostles, 2. prophets, 3. teachers and so on.*

Again I think Eugene Peterson's paraphrase is helpful here. Instead of numbering the jobs or making it sound like a flow chart, Peterson lists the jobs and reminds us that the church is a *complete Body and not a gigantic, unidimensional part.*

The idea of all the worshippers being involved in the life of the congregation, of valuing all gifts equally, is still revolutionary for many churches today. It is so radical that I daresay the church based in Rome has not yet understood it.

This familiar passage, like Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, is one that Mennonites tend to take literally. While we do have hierarchy in our midst, we are also prone to poke at those in leadership and not let them rest too easily on their laurels.

I will always remember the reaction of Patricia Barth, who was interim pastor with us in 2007. She was continually blown away by how many people are involved in the life of the congregation here. (She also commented on how unusual it is to have so many men in attendance and involved. Sorry if I have taken you for granted, men.)

Barbara Brown Taylor has a lovely chapter in her book **An Alter in the World** called "The practice of wearing skin." She describes what it means to live in a body, reminding the reader in various ways that it is through our bodies that we know God. We can try as hard as we might to understand God with our brains, to work out creeds

and theologies, Christology and ecclesiology, eschatology, but in the end it is with our bodies that we finally know God.

I wonder if this applies to Paul's wisdom to the Corinthian church as well. They may be a fairly intellectual bunch, at least the ones that think they are in charge. But Paul says, you are all part of a body. He doesn't even refer to the brain as one of the necessary parts. He talks about the parts that act, that sense, that are humble. What Paul skips is that bodies need care. Bodies need to be fed and watered, washed and nurtured and given some rest.

Here at Hyattsville Mennonite we try to take care of the body. We prioritize getting to know each other well enough that we know what gifts people have and how they might be celebrated and offered in the congregation.

Sometimes the gifts are obvious, but it may be a really stressful season in the person's work life, or they have young children at home, or an ailing parent to take care of. Maybe in that season the rest of us need to give the gift of rest to the overwhelmed one.

But this Sunday is not about encouraging you to step back, it is about cheering you on. If you are newer to the congregation and have not yet offered your gifts or are looking for a way to begin getting to know people, and yourself, a bit better, if you are looking for a way to grow closer to God and the body of Christ, do fill out the gift discernment form. Prayerfully ask where you might fit into this body.

If you have been around for a while, prayerfully ask yourself what you have seen in others that inspires you and that you would like to see them offer to this body. You might even want to try on something new yourself.

As the body of Christ, we offer our gifts as part of the care and feeding of this body. We nurture the body by participating in it, even if what we have to offer seems insignificant or unworthy. And sometimes just showing up, in the body God gave you, is gift enough to the rest of us.