

Words for God's Church: Spiritual Matters
I Corinthians 12:1-11

Our scripture today begins with these words: “*Now concerning spiritual gifts...*” The word Paul uses here that is translated gifts is not the same word he uses in verse four but is another word that means either things, persons or matters. But in this context because he moves on to talk about spiritual gifts most scholars use gifts. But I want us to start today by thinking about spiritual matters for this is at the heart of what Paul was concerned about. The issue at hand was what it meant to be spiritual within the community of faith - as a Christian. How were they spiritual persons and how was this different from those in the community who saw themselves as spiritual but worshiped idols?

It is interesting that in our world today more and more people are saying they are “spiritual but not religious.” I have struggled with this designation for many years because I always thought of these two things as being the same thing. Maybe you have too. I always believed that to be spiritual or religious meant we related to God with rites, rituals, practices and communal worship. But things have changed. As a matter of fact it has become a totally different designation than being active in church when researchers ask questions. And now over 30% of people see themselves as “spiritual but not religious” in America. And that group is growing.

In her book *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass notes that “Historian Robert Fuller points out that the popular definitions of the words diverged throughout the twentieth century: ‘The word *spiritual* came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience, while the word *religious* came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal ritual, and adherence to official denominational doctrines.’ Not only did the words come to signify different aspects of faith by the twenty-first century, but the terms “spiritual” and “religious” have become laden with emotional connotations. In general, “spirituality” is taken as

a positive term, whereas “religion” is often negative; spirituality is understood as somehow more authentic, religion as having “a somewhat cynical orientation.” (Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, 2012, p. 67) Butler Bass goes on to note that the word “spiritual” today “is both a critique of institutional religion and a longing for meaningful connection.” It often is a way of saying someone is dissatisfied with the way things are and they are looking for a new way of connecting to God and their neighbors without the trappings of religious structure. They long to understand spiritual matters. They long to have a connection to a higher being. For us as Christians we define this connection as the work of the Holy Spirit. To understand spiritual matters as Christians we need to talk about the various ways God’s Spirit gets worked into our lives. And this is just what Paul was doing in our passage today.

Paul acknowledged that this was complex and often misunderstood and so he took it step by step over the next several chapters to explain in detail how God’s spirit works in the lives of believers. Paul began where they were for he knew that before they came to know God through Christ they worshiped a variety of idols as did those around them. The implication is that they just followed the crowd believing in the latest fad. For Paul the fact that the idols did not speak was a sure sign that they were not the one true God for central to the God of Israel was a belief that God spoke powerfully to people through the centuries. And God continues to speak through those who proclaim Jesus as Lord.

This is the first and most important sign of a spiritual life - proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord. Friends, we need to understand how radical a statement that was in Paul’s day. To say “Jesus is Lord” was to say Caesar was not. And that had all kinds of ramifications. Some believe that the state approved religious sects tried to get Christians to say “Let Jesus be cursed” as proof of their renunciation of Christ. Regardless what Paul was saying was that for someone to say “Jesus is Lord” was only possible when the Holy Spirit has come into their hearts and convicted them. For it gave them the strength to proclaim their faith in the community. So the first and most important way God’s

spirit gets worked into our lives is through our relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This has been Paul's central message since the beginning of his letter. God's spirit is Christ's spirit empowering us to focus on Jesus and what Jesus calls us to. When God's spirit is within us we have the mind of Christ and our lives are shaped by that relationship.

And through God's Spirit we are given gifts. A variety of gifts. No one has the same gifts but all gifts are given by God. Paul says it so well:

*There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God,
who activates all of them in everyone.*

Hear that emphasis. The same God who gives us gifts *activates all of them in everyone*. They are ours because they are given by God. There evidently were some within the Corinthian church who were saying their gifts were more important than others. One of the gifts that was being elevated was the gifts of speaking in tongues. And there seemed to be a belief that if you didn't have that gift then you didn't have the Spirit of God within you. That was the conflict. Paul was countering that claim. He was saying that every gift is important for they all come from God - they all originate in God's spirit.

So many times today when we speak of spiritual gifts many still do the very thing Paul was warning against. We love to prioritize spiritual gifts and say one is greater than another. Oh, he or she is more gifted than I am. But what Paul was saying here was that every gift matters. Part of the wisdom of God is that God gifts us differently for different purposes because we need all the gifts to build up the whole. We aren't whole as a community without all the parts put together. Above all Paul was seeking unity within the community. That was how he began his letter. But he wasn't advocating that everyone needed to be alike - as a matter of fact that was the opposite of what he was saying. Paul wanted the early Christians to see and understand that God uses different people in

different ways. That was how God created us. For God has gifted us in different ways. And because all gifts come from God they are all valued and needed within the community. And through God's spirit within us we recognize the importance of every one's gift. For we need each other and we are stronger when we utilize everyone gifts.

In the summer of 2002, nine miners in western Pennsylvania became trapped 240 feet below ground in a flooded mine shaft. Rescue efforts began immediately, but the rescue crews knew the odds were against them saving all the men. Amazingly, however, all nine miners survived the ordeal. These men claim that it was their decision to bond together that saved their lives. From the onset of the danger, the men watched out for one another. They tied themselves together, so that no one could float away or slip under the water. If one man got tired, his bond to the other men kept him afloat. The miners vowed that whether they lived or died, they would do so together. ("Miners took vow to die or die together" by Larry Neumeister, Associated Press, The Knoxville News-Sentinel, July 29, 2002, p. A1) As a community we keep each other "afloat" by using our variety of gifts to help one another. That is why acknowledging our variety of gifts is so important - we need each other and all our gifts to survive.

And that was at the center of what Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand about spiritual matters. When God's Spirit is active and alive within us we become concerned with the needs of all those around us. For the very purpose of our being gifted is so that we might become other centered. Paul says "*to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*" Friends, when the Holy Spirit is within us - when we have proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and claimed his authority over our lives we can no longer only be interested in our individual needs. We become concerned with the lives of others - how we work and live together. That is the surest sign that God's spirit has taken over our lives - when we work for the common good - for the good of the whole - for the building up of all.

Shirley Guthrie in *Christian Doctrine* notes that Christian spirituality begins by looking

outside, not inside, ourselves. He notes that contrary to the way the world looks at spiritual matters if we want “to recognize and experience the presence of God’s life-renewing Spirit in us, we must be willing first to look away from ourselves, outside ourselves, beyond our personal experience... we must be God centered and Christ-centered.” (Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 298-299) For when God’s spirit has come into our lives we are drawn into a different type of relationship with other people. We become concerned for the well being of the whole and not just about our own needs and wants.

Diana Butler Bass tells a story her mother shared about her high school days. Her mother was in high school in 1956 when schools were desegregated. Appalled by the court ruling opening white schools to African-American students, her friends arranged a student strike, refusing to attend school on the first day of integration. They invited her to join in. Her mother felt torn between her friends and what she knew to be right. She always believed that racial prejudice was wrong. Defying her friends, she went to school. And she decided to meet the bus and greet her new classmates. When Diana Butler Bass asked her mother “why did you do that?” Her mother replied “Well, I realized that if I were a stranger at a new school, I’d want someone to be at the bus to welcome me.” (Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, p. 155-156)

Friends, when God’s Spirit gets worked into our lives we put ourselves in other people shoes and act in ways that are consistent with Christ’s calling upon our lives. God has gifted us so that we might be part of creating a world where all people are heard, all people’s needs are met and all people are welcomed. We are all given something - some gift that can show others who God is. Our challenge is to figure out what that gift is and to use it for the building up of God’s kingdom.