

“Exercising Your Ministry: Putting Gifts Into Ministry Through the Church”

Ephesians 4:1-16

January 24, 2010

We have been looking together in this sermon series “You Have A Ministry” at the faith and the gifts given to Christians through the Spirit to exercise in their lives. Today, we look at how Christians might exercise those gifts within the church.

The biblical text for today from Ephesians tells us two important things on that subject. It tells us the purpose of exercising spiritual gifts within the church and it gives us a few examples of those gifts.

The text begins with the apostle Paul’s plea to the Christians in Ephesus to live out their Christianity “worthily.” Using what some scholars think might be the words of an early baptismal creed with the repetition of one, one, one, he specifically calls them to unity in the church, unity as Christ’s body. He then goes on to explain how that unity works. The church, he says, began with Christ’s gift, the gift of his Spirit at Pentecost. This he explains in a descension and ascension illustration, the exact details of which are debated by scholars.¹

Paul writes that Christ descended and ascended. Some scholars assert that this speaks of Christ’s descension from heaven to earth and then his ascension to heaven at Easter or on Ascension Day. Others assert that his descension includes both his descent to earth and then to the underworld—“the lower parts of the earth”—at his death, and only then his ascension to heaven. Still others assert that his initial descension was to earth and then his ascension to heaven at Easter, but **that he descended as well on Pentecost to give his Spirit to the church.**

¹ See Ralph Martin’s discussion of the three basic arguments in *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon* in the Interpretation Series, pp. 49-53. Martin also writes of an order, and that issue is not addressed in this sermon.

It is this latter interpretation that I believe makes the most sense with regard to this text. Read this way, Paul is saying here that Christ not only gave the Spirit to his church, he gave and gives particular gifts to people within the church so that the church might be a complete and unified body. In going on to say that these gifts must be utilized, Paul reiterates the fact that unity is a gift, but it is a gift that also must be “cultivated and cherished.”²

Paul then gives some examples of the particular gifts. They are the gifts of being an apostle, a prophet, an evangelist, a pastor, a teacher. In other places in the Bible, he lists additional gifts. Some of these are healing, the working of miracles, the discerning of spirits, speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, service, exhortation, generosity, leadership, mercy, administration. Clearly, none of the lists Paul gives in the Bible are exhaustive. Some have attempted to group the gifts into categories, such as the gifts of speaking and the gifts of service, but I am not sure they can be so neatly arranged, especially since there are others.

And Paul’s point here is, I believe, not a description of all the gifts, but again, a strong statement of their purpose. They are like the parts of a physical body. Each is meant for a particular task, but each is meant as well to work together with the other parts to make the body function at its best. Paul spells this out more completely in his first letter to the Corinthians where he writes, “For the body does not consist of one member but many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If they whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is there are many parts, yet one body.”

² Martin, p. 48.

In that letter to the Corinthians, Paul also speaks of the value of each gift, writing “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.’” Each part is valuable and important and each part should be cared for. The connection is also such that “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”

In that same spirit, we recognize and honor several among our congregation who have exercised their gifts here. Sheldon and Melinda Sears have lived out their gifts of everything from working with the sound system to teaching. We think as well of Richard Loffland, who used to head up our sound system, but whose back problems now prevent him from doing do. Therefore, others have also stepped in; I think particularly of Steve Specht and John Weber.

Moving on through the text, we are reminded that the body is also not just **any** body. It is to be Christ’s visible body on earth, doing as he would do, following his way, acting in his loves. Christ has made us his body, but we must keep it together and working.

Paul does not stop there. The body is built up in unity and completeness for the further purpose of withstanding “every wind of doctrine...people’s trickery...and craftiness in deceitful scheming.” In that way, it can best represent Christ.

Last week, we examined the process of discerning one’s gifts. We talked about taking an inventory, participating in a program such as Charles Bryant’s OBEDIENCE, seeking to answer Frederick Buechner’s question about where our deep gladness and the need meet, and conversation with God and others. I asked you to begin the discerning process if you have never done it or if you had not done it in a while.

Perhaps you did, and now you are ready to try out what you think might be a gift. There are probably yet things that stand in your way. I have heard some of these issues. They are

How do I know?

I'm too busy or I'm too tired.

Perhaps folks will laugh if I fail or if it seems unlike me.

Perhaps sometimes, all of these are simply excuses, but I do not dismiss them as not being genuinely felt at times. I know many of you aren't sure, are incredibly busy, or are simply tired, or like all of us, fear failure or embarrassment.

Let me try to address those points. First, the “how do I know?” As I said last week, you take part in discernment and then you also keep open to the Spirit. In the meantime, you try, you practice, you may stumble, you may succeed. How does anyone know anything like this? How do you know someone should be your friend? How do you know if it's right to marry someone? It is discernment, it is time; it is also a choice to step out in faith, to trust God, to try and to be vulnerable.

A second point is “I'm too busy.” One Christian blogger has addressed this.³ She writes, “The definition of today's man or woman: Busy.” Yet she notes that sometimes, we are busy doing some things that don't really matter. Our priorities might be out of line. Or, as I have read from the writings of business people to life coaches, we may get caught up too much in the immediate and neglect the truly important. Perhaps, if we think we are too busy to exercise spiritual gifts in the church, we need to rethink priorities or simply the way we plan and live our daily lives.

An additional thought here—maybe our busy-ness leads to that third issue—we are simply tired. I believe this can be genuine too. Two points here: First, I know that I have found in my own life that even in the midst of all I do, part of it must be **rest**, and part of it must be **play**. I cannot exercise my spiritual gifts if I am overly stressed or exhausted. Second, even if I

³ Stacy Duplease, sacredstoriesbystacy.blogspot.com.

do get rest and play, I must also ask myself, am I tired because I have taken on too much—have I over-functioned—and not let other parts of the body do their part?

A third issue with respect to things that might stand in your way, you think “perhaps I’ll make a fool of myself.” Perhaps you will. Perhaps if you sing, you will make a mistake. Perhaps if you teach, one of your students will make fun of you. Perhaps if you pray, you will find yourself at a loss for words. My response to this? Here it is, and I mean this in the most loving and Christian way, GET OVER IT! As a friend of mine once told me when I was embarrassed about a mistake I made, “welcome to the human race.” If I stopped being a minister of Word and Sacrament because I fumbled on the Words of Institution once, or stumbled over part of my sermon, or said the wrong thing to someone in the hospital, I would have stopped before I even started. Yes, we want to do well, and yes, we seek to do our best, but whom do you know who is perfect?

In fact, let me tell you that story in which I was reminded of my humanity. Some of you may know it. I was in seminary, in my second year, and I was taking part in the Ministry Team—M Team—program. Teams of four would get together and travel to various churches for a weekend. We would conduct a Saturday-night event, then lead Sunday School and worship the next day. Each time, each of us took various turns at the gifts, exploring them. When it came to going to a fairly large church one weekend, it was my turn to preach. I had a decent sermon, I thought. At the 11 service, I ascended the four or so steps to the pulpit, read the text, prayed, and began to preach. When I turned to Page 3 of my sermon, I discovered it was not there. Neither was Page 4, 5 or 6. I panicked. Thank God I had had some training in thinking on my feet in law school and as a lawyer. I paused, I looked up, and I said, “You know, could you just hold on a minute? I left the second half of my sermon on my chair.” There was some murmuring; I went

down to get the pages; I returned, red as a beet and said, “Someday, I’ll laugh about this.” And I went on.

So, I was embarrassed. I felt I had let God and my M Team and the church and myself down. But, I got over it. I set aside my pride and realized that exercising the gifts of ministry might not always go smoothly. I would make mistakes and missteps. But God would be with me.

The rest of the story? That church needed a summer intern; they told our team after our weekend and they asked me if I would consider serving. I had not committed to an internship yet that summer and I said I would. I spent a wonderful summer there, learning, working, resting and playing. I was able to use my gifts to be part of that body of Christ, if but for a summer. So God works, even through us.

What gifts do you believe God has given you to exercise in this church? How will their exercise contribute to our unity, our strength, our growth, our love? Think about it; pray about it; do it. Like Paul, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

Amen.