

I'd like to talk with you today about spiritual gifts. Let's start with the Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12. Briefly, this letter was written by (the Apostle/Saint) Paul in 63 or 64. Not 1964 but 0064. Historians love these types of letters because they are snapshots of life from a long time ago. Paul was writing to a congregation he had started in the town of Corinth. There was a problem, and he was addressing it. I'll get to the problem in a moment, but first, let's look at spiritual gifts.

In the year 0064, the worshipping community in Corinth already knew about spiritual gifts. Paul was not introducing them to the concept; they already knew about them and knew enough to put them into various categories. The problem is that they considered some gifts more important, or elevated, above others. Paul disagreed. He wrote in reply to them, "Just like there are many body parts but one body, so it is with the Church which is Christ's body on earth." He goes on to write that we can't all be hands, or feet, or eyes or ears. Also, the foot can't say that because it's not a hand it doesn't belong to the body (and vice versa). We're all different, but that's what makes the Church work just like how the body works.

He then wrote the following: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues."

This list starts with "first" which means he is ranking them in order of importance. He intended it that way because in Corinth, they too had a list of the most important. Care to guess which one was on top? It was speaking in tongues. They thought that was the best and most important gift and if you didn't have it, you would not be allowed to be in charge.

Let me take a moment to talk about the gift of tongues. My belief in this has changed over time. I used to think that "tongues" meant one could read/write/speak in a variety of different languages. For instance, my daughter has that gift – she can read/write/speak in Russian, English, Portuguese and Spanish. I struggle with just one language. She has that gift. But, I have come to learn there is more to that particular spiritual gift. In my previous congregation, I had two people that could speak-in-tongues and one person is my parish before that one. No one really knows for sure, but speaking-in-tongues is a language that was perhaps the original language on the planet, or it's the language of the Kingdom, or it's the language of angels; again, no one really knows for sure. What I have experienced is that it is the same language. Someone who has that gift in China, or Uganda, or England all speak the same language. That's a part of the miracle of it. Secondly, it's not a taught language. People just have it, like a gift. Like a friend said (who has the gift), she wasn't taught to hear, she was born with it. This gift came upon her in prayer. I have heard it. And, perhaps one of my gifts is the ability to understand/interpret what is being said. So, whether you believe it is someone who is skilled at communicating, or they speak a variety of languages, or, if you've experienced it like me, that's fine. It's a gift.

Back to the lesson, people had this gift in Corinth. They thought they were the best and they used it as a test for leadership and all the rest in the Church. Paul, however, wrote that number one is “apostles”. That word, in Greek (which is the language he wrote the letter in), means “send-one”. Or, the one who is sent. Back in the 1970s in Florida, the Church of the Redeemer in Sarasota sent people (apostles) to Longboat. They started All Angels. I don’t know if they spoke in tongues; probably not; but they planted this church. If they were in Corinth in the year 64, they would have had to have had the gift of tongues before they were sent out to plant a church. Paul said that’s wrong.

Second is prophets. That’s not people who can predict the weather, or the stock market, or earthquakes. Prophets, in those days, could read the ancient Hebrew scripture and make it relevant to them in their day. They could read the news of the day and see God at work in the world about them. Third is teachers – that one needs no explanation. Fourth is deeds of power – people who can work miracles. Then gifts of healing. Then forms of assistance – generous people who could give money to help others. Then leadership, then tongues. Notice he put tongues last in a community that thought it was first. It was intentional. This would be a different Church body if we stuck with the idea that tongues was required for leadership and planting churches. We’d be a much smaller Church body to be sure.

In the last two thousand years, we’ve expanded our understanding of spiritual gifts. Paul talked about them individually. We now see them corporately too. In other words, each church has its own spiritual gifts. I am the dean of the Manasota Deanery which has fourteen churches in it. As I get to know them, I can tell you that each church is different – they have different gifts. It’s weird, we’re all in Manatee or Sarasota County, so we are close geographically, but we are much different spiritually speaking. Again, we have the same prayer book, same hymnal, we use the same Bible readings from week to week but we’re all different.

All Angels has spiritual gifts. First is Apostles. That’s not our gift. We don’t send missionaries out from our parish. How about the prophetic gift? Yes, we have that ability – to make Scripture relevant and to see God working around us. That being said, here are the three main gifts I see at All Angels. First, we have the spiritual gift of joy. People who visit here tell me all the time that joy is here. This is a joyous church community. It’s a great gift because joy is a gift from God. People come here in a bad mood and leave in a good mood. It’s our gift (and, there are some church where people show up in a good mood and leave in a bad mood but that certainly is not us). Our first gift is joy. Our second gift is peace. I’ve been told many many times that people come here and feel peace. They feel it in their hearts and their lives. They take this peace out into the world. I’ve been told that All Angels, both in person and online, recharges her members each week to put up with the non-peace that is out in the world. We have the gift of peace. The third gift is unity. The first mark of the Holy Spirit, unity is very important. Different people, from different experiences and locations, find that they are in fellowship here. It’s unity. Some have told me that up north they are Roman Catholic, but on Longboat they are an Episcopalian. I’ve heard the same about being Presbyterian at home but here they are Episcopalian. We don’t require that you leave your religious tradition and become uniform to our way. Nope, unity is not uniformity. Just look at any worship service here and some people will kneel, others stand, others sit, some make the sign of the cross, others don’t; many receive communion – some just the

wafer only – others prefer a blessing. Even people of the Jewish faith find unity and peace and joy here. It's because there one One Spirit, One Body, One Hope and Faith.

In our day and time, I can't imagine three gifts that our community, country and world need more than joy, peace and unity. And, they are our gifts!

The prayers this morning lead us to not be silent about our faith but to invite others. I encourage you to invite people to All Angels – especially people who need joy, or peace, or unity, or all three! Invite them here so they can experience our gifts.

The last piece about gifts is personal. You have spiritual gifts. Whether you think you do or do not you do – according to Scripture and nearly two thousand years of Church history and practice. Those gifts fit into the spiritual gifts of this place and we fit into the entire Body of Christ. So, what are your gifts? If you would like to talk with me about this, please let me know. I'd love to meet with you for prayer and discernment.

Gifts change over your lifetime. The Apostles – sent ones – are not always sent; especially as they age. Prophetic-ness increases over one's lifetime. The best teachers are the ones who have been around for a long time. Chris Collinsworth is a football commentator for NBC. He used to be a wide receiver. But now, he has the gift of storytelling. I'll tune into a game he is calling because he tells a good story about what is happening on the field – even if I don't care about what teams are playing. He's developed that gift as he ages. And so do you. Your gifts, like your body, has/is/will change over time.

I rejoice in our shared gifts and especially the gifts of joy, peace and unity. May we continue to share our gifts and invite others to participate with us to feel the love and power of God here at All Angels. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.