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The Federated Church of Hyannis
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A VARIETY OF GIFTS
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

This is the season for football fans to crown the number one college team and the winner of the Super Bowl. This will soon be followed by the March Madness in college basketball and then play-offs in pro basketball followed by the Stanley Cup in hockey, by which time the pursuit of the baseball World Series will be well underway. The obsession with identifying number one is not limited to sports.

Peace prizes, beauty pageants, and Oscars do the same thing. Television generates countless competitions to identify the best singer, dancer, comic, bachelor, trivia contestant, even the biggest loser of body weight. Many years ago a Royal ruler from India visited America. He declined an invitation to attend a horse race. He explained, "The fact that one horse can run faster than others is both obvious and trivial." Yet we are obsessed with being number one even within the church.

"I would have made a good evangelist," said Sally to Linus. "You know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." How'd you do that?" asked Linus. Said Sally, "I hit him with my lunch box." Diversity can be difficult. Accepting others who have different opinions and approaches can be a challenge. We may wish others had the same opinions and tastes we have but God gives us diversity and Paul urges church folks to share their diverse gifts with the whole church.

Paul then begins this chapter with words of caution. Maybe your professed faith in Jesus is not as high and mighty as you think. Maybe you have professed it only in words but your behavior is no better than before. Our words may not curse Jesus but our behavior can. Here is a gift to be sought by all Christians: plays well with others.

St. Paul was writing to a church that was torn with dissension. That is why his letters to the church in Corinth deal with a lot of internal church issues. At some places he talks of conflict and other places about loyalty to leaders,

at another place about sexual morality and another place about communion and yet another place whether or not to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

In this chapter he touches on the problem of some believers who felt superior to other believers or refused to give their time and substance and ability to the work of the church. Some were not just relishing their spiritual gifts but find these gifts a reason to consider themselves better than others.

It is easy to think some of us are more equal than others. Paul compared the body of Christ to a human body. "If the foot would 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 would 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 the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose."

Yet many think themselves more deserving of honor and privilege than others. Susan B. Anthony called on newspaper editor Horace Greeley one day in 1860 to ask for his newspaper's support for women's suffrage. Greeley was not sympathetic. He was an opponent of women's rights, mainly because he considered women to be of no military value. "What would you do," he asked, "in the event of a civil war?" "I would do just what you would do," Ms. Anthony replied. "I would sit in my office and write articles urging other people to go and fight."

Within the church there is an unfortunate tendency toward spiritual one-upmanship. One church will claim it is a born again church; another that it is a Bible church; yet another that it is a Holy Spirit church; and yet another that it is an Acts 2:42 church. We are a mission church. We are a fellowship church. We are an evangelical church. We are a New Testament Church. Some even claim they are the only one true church. Labels can be a self-important way of elevating ourselves.

Sometimes church names are used as a kind of one-upmanship. When we were serving the church in New Hampshire I answered the phone, "Church office." Someone reminded me that the church's name was "The Congregational Church of Hollis." Duly noted. When I was told that since that church belonged to the United Church of Christ I should say, "The Congregational Church of Hollis, United Church of Christ." Duly noted.

Then I had a friend who was involved in an ecumenical group she urged us to join. It is called “Churches of Christ Uniting.” I asked, “Would we then become “The Congregational Church of Hollis, United Church of Christ, Churches of Christ Uniting.” She said we would. Duly noted.

Then denominational leaders urged us at various times to declare ourselves open and affirming, a just peace church, a multicultural church, a green church and an open to all church. Duly noted. Had I listened to all those voices and accepted all those labels that would mean answering the phone, “The Congregational Church of Hollis, United Church of Christ, Churches of Christ Uniting, an open and affirming, just peace, multicultural, green church, open to all.” By the time I got through all of that, whatever problem someone was calling with they would have already solved. I just answered the phone, “Church office.”

In the heart of God we are not better or worse than others but we are each unique. And what a dreadful thought that everyone should think just as we do. When I bought my latest car my wife had something to say about my choice of style and color. “A car that color looks like half the cars on the road.” Duly noted. It turns out she is right and sometimes I have trouble picking it out in a parking lot. I have to walk through the lot pushing the clicker to see which one is mine. What if we sang hymns with only a single note? What if we all knew exactly the same joke? What if we held a potluck and everyone brought Brussels sprouts?

Variety is such a God-given blessing. Without labels that announce our spiritual superiority we should just welcome all those who bring their God-given gifts to be used in the work of the church. Without need for special recognition we should give these gifts for the common good. A number of years ago I was working on a master’s degree in New York City.

In this group there were three Anglo-Americans, one African-American, one Puerto Rican, one Jamaican, one Virgin Islander, one Cuban, one Panamanian, one Bermudian, one Egyptian, one person of uncertain ethnicity, two kind of Methodists, two United Church of Christ, a Presbyterian, two kinds of Baptists, two kinds of Lutherans, an Episcopalian, one Church of God, and one Seventh Day Adventist pastor – and that is from a group of twelve. What varied and rich gifts we shared.

We just went through a gift giving season. Some of us received gifts for Christmas we honestly have no idea what to do with. We would like to exchange them but do not want to offend the giver.

They expect to see us wearing the chartreuse tie with the flamingoes or displaying the paint by number picture they did for us of dancing clowns. Or maybe we just don't know where to return it or don't have a needed receipt or think we might be able to get away with holding on to it and "re-gifting" it. What are we to do with our gifts? I can't help you with those gifts but Paul does give us guidance in how to manage our God-given gifts.

In the Bible the Greek word for gift is "charisma." Unfortunately some people get labeled as being charismatic people and some not, by which is usually meant that they have a gift to attract and lead people. Others think of the gift of being charismatic as speaking in tongues or, as it is currently called by some, the use of private prayer language.

Public schools have something that is called a "gifted" program for children identified with special academic gifts. They are entitled to special advance classes. There are also children labeled "special needs." The gifted kids get privilege and the "special needs" kids get stigmatized. Paul simply said that God activates gifts in each and every one of us. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

It can be scary if we think we have to depend on ourselves alone. An elderly woman planned to travel abroad, so one day she went to the post office and applied for a passport. The clerk told her that she would have to take the loyalty oath first. "Raise your right hand, please," he said. The lady did as she was told. "Do you swear to defend the Constitution of the United States against all its enemies, foreign or domestic?" he asked. The woman hesitated and turned pale. She leaned toward the clerk and asked in a trembling voice, "All by myself?"

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord." A chaplain in World War I came across a dying soldier. "May I pray for you?" he asked. The soldier, seeing the chaplain's crucifix, said, "But Father, I do not belong to your church." The chaplain replied, "But you do belong to my God." And he prayed with him.

Spiritual maturity in Christ allows us to loosen our grip on what we have for the sake of the God we love. Loving and trusting the God who gifted us, we can live and give our gifts more freely and openly, less anxiously, less selfishly. This is less a matter of being willing to give of time and talent and treasure than the faith to turn our lives and will over to God. In our walk with Christ we should learn how to hold what we have of time and substance less tightly and give more freely.

Tony Campolo is a professor of sociology and a popular speaker. He was invited to a women's conference where he was to give a major address. These women were being challenged to raise several thousand dollars for a mission project goal. While Campolo was sitting on the dais, the chairperson turned to him and asked him if he would pray for God's blessing as they considered their individual responses to the goal. Campolo stood and, to the utter amazement of everyone present, graciously said "no." How shocking – a preacher who was asked to pray and declined.

He approached the microphone and said, "You already have all the resources necessary to complete this mission project right here within this room. It would be inappropriate to ask for God's blessing, when in fact God has already blessed you with the abundance and the means to achieve this goal. The necessary gifts are in your hands. As soon as we take the offering and underwrite this mission project, we will thank God for freeing us to be the generous, responsible and accountable stewards that we're called to be as Christian disciples." And they did.

"There are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." No two snow flakes are alike and no two people are alike. It is part of a life-long journey to learn and develop what is unique to each of us. It is part of the life-long journey of faith to discover how the Spirit of God working within us helps us use those gifts for the common good. It is God who has gifted us. Now it for us to give our gifts to others.