

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR C

January 20, 2013

I Corinthians 12:1-11

Gifts Abound!

Rev. Janice M. Lamott Adams

Many of you were here last week on Baptism of the Lord Sunday when we reflected on that memorable day when Jesus was baptized. We recalled that powerful moment when the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters, naming him as God's beloved Son. Later in our service, we re-affirmed our own baptismal vows. The baptismal font and its simulated flowing stream is still up here for awhile as a visual reminder that we are chosen as God's own.

As we reflect on that font and what it represents, we find today's lectionary reading taking us deeper into the significance of our baptism. In his letter to the Corinthian church, one of our readings for today, the apostle Paul invites that congregation and invites us to think about the spiritual gifts we have receive as baptized members of the body of Christ. Here is part of Paul's list: gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, prophecy. He is clear that those gifts have not been given for personal gain, but to edify and build up the body of Christ. the church. And, lest we think its up to us, Paul reminds us that it is God's Spirit which activates all of them.

I remember a church which had this listed in its bulletin: Pastor: Tom Tate; Ministers: All the People. They had it right. Baptized Christians are all called to use their gifts in ministry to Christ's church.

There is a special group of people here today who are prepared to use their gifts for ministry. They are some of your newly elected, trained, and examined ruling elders and deacons. We will install them later in this service. (We will ordain and install the others on a Sunday they can be present in worship.) Each of these new leaders will commit themselves to a particular life of service in this congregation. They bring with them a variety of gifts which God has given them. God's Spirit will empower them to use these gifts to build up this body of Christ.

You, the members of the congregation, chose these people because you have seen in them a variety of gifts God has given them for the particular office to which they have been called. You have seen in these **ruling elders**, people of faith, dedication and good judgment; those whose lives demonstrate the living out of the Christian gospel; people who have the ability to strengthen and nurture the faith of this congregation.

You have chosen **deacons**, people with sound judgment, people who follow the example of Jesus Christ to minister to those in need, the sick, the friendless; the shutins, and to carry other responsibilities the session may assign them.

There is a tendency for some people who are not called to primary leadership roles in a congregation to discount their own gifts in favor of those chosen for specific tasks. In so doing

they fail to notice their own special gifts for ministry. I think the apostle Paul might have had this in mind when he wrote these words to the Corinthian church:

“Now 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.”

That word **“everyone”** is all inclusive. It lets no one of us off the hook. By virtue of our baptism; by virtue of being called as God’s own, we have all the gifts we need to do God’s work here and beyond our doors. God intends for us to identify and use these gifts for doing ministry in God’s name.

If you were standing where I am today, you would look out over our people and be able to name some of their gifts. Some of them are ordained church leaders, past and present, whose work is done more publicly. But there are people with other gifts; for teaching Sunday School, leading youth programs, ushering, serving coffee, singing in the choir, playing instruments. Some people have gifts for reaching out and connecting with visitors who come to worship for the first time. And two weeks ago, on Epiphany Sunday we saw in the children’s drama, many more gifts than the magi brought to the Christ Child. That’s why I entitled my sermon: Gifts Abound! For they do, here at Central.

If we stay open to God’s Spirit, I believe more and more gifts will appear. Some may be hidden from view now but surface later when they are needed most. Some people, due to their shyness may need our encouragement to offer and use their gifts. Some gifts stay hidden from our awareness until someone points them out to us.

A case in point was a young woman named Suzy, who was a member of our congregation in Cortez, Colorado. She was the editor of the local weekly newspaper, and when we arrived, the church’s Clerk of Session. Suzy was bright and articulate but I had seldom, if ever, seen her in the front of the congregation. She was an excellent clerk and was elected to the Pastor Nominating Committee, serving as their secretary.

That congregation was blessed with two male elders who had special gifts for preaching. They were almost always the ones called on to preach when the pastor had a Sunday off. But neither of them was available one Sunday when Pastor Samuel and I needed to be away. Being a small church with limited funds, they really couldn’t afford to pay an outside preacher. The chair of the Worship Committee came to me for suggestions. I suggested he contact Suzy. He was a bit hesitant at first because no one had ever seen her in that role. He decided to ask her. The next Sunday Suzy said to me: “You are on my list.” She didn’t think she could preach, was pretty fearful of the idea and not too happy that I had suggested her name.

To make a long story short, she accepted the challenge, preached that Sunday and loved it! So did the congregation. From there Suzy went on to train as a Commissioned Lay Pastor in our presbytery and was in demand in several of our smaller congregations without full time

pastors. A year or so ago, she became the weekend pastor at Rico, a tiny dormant mining town nestled in the mountains north of Cortez. In this year's Christmas letter Suzy wrote of that church adding new members and becoming a more viable congregation in that community.

As I look back on that experience, my suggesting Suzy to the worship chair was clearly the nudging of God's Spirit to help activate her hidden gifts for ministry. That experience made me wonder if there were other Suzy's out there whose hidden gifts were waiting to surface; not necessarily gifts for preaching or pastoral leadership but gifts that would help the church be all it was called to be.

In casual conversation one day, I discovered another Suzy right here at Central; someone who was fairly new in the congregation at the time and who has a gift for sewing beautifully. When encouraged to share her gifts, she made all the lovely curtains for our newly refurbished Junior Room. She now serves on our Board of Deacons, on the Worship and Arts Council and can often be seen serving coffee on Sunday mornings. I give thanks to God that she said "yes" to the nudging of the Spirit. Where else can we find such hidden gifts among us? I'm convinced they are out there.

As Paul said, there is a wide variety of gifts needed in the church. And they are not always needed in prominent leadership positions. Maybe your gift is working with children and you'd like to assist Andrea in the nursery some Sundays, or teach or assist in Sunday School. Maybe you like to sing and could use that gift in the choir. Maybe your gift is in welcoming visitors, or in listening to people who are lonely and need someone to talk to. Shirley often needs help in the church office, especially on her vacation days and as we develop an updated database system. We have several buildings in need of repair. Perhaps your gift is in doing hands on ministry with hammer and nails. And one of the most powerful ministries of all is to pray for others.

I suggest that we challenge ourselves during the rest of this interim time, to pray for God's Spirit to work within and among us; to help us become more aware of the spiritual gifts each of us has been given. May we ask God to guide us in using those gifts for the building up of Central Presbyterian. And may we challenge ourselves to become more aware of the gifts of others and be willing to help them find ways to use them.

There is no doubt in my mind that all the gifts we need are right here among us waiting to be activated by the Spirit. Thanks be to God! Amen!