

In preparation for this sermon about spiritual gifts, Marsha and I were talking about some of the memorable gifts in our family

- I remember when my sister and I were given fancy one-speed Schwinn bicycles, which at the time were the coolest things on the block
- My dad swears that one year I gave my mother a catcher's mitt for her birthday, but I have no memory of that
- Later I did give her some straw Christmas ornaments from Sweden, which delighted her and found prominent places on the tree every year afterwards

When I went to Outward Bound in northern Minnesota in February, Mom knit me a thick, woolen sweater that must have weighed fifteen pounds

- Not like today's lightweight polar fleece, but I sure felt her love wrapped around me on that trip
- My mom died fifteen years ago this month, but we still wear sweaters she knit for us
- They're the best kind of presents, because she used her creative gifts to make them

Marsha and I share wonderful memories of gifts given to and received from our kids

- When they were about twelve and ten we decided it was time to leave them home together in the summer when we went to work
- We'd never had a television set up to that point, and boy were they surprised when one turned up in the house!
- Then we got them a puppy as well, and we'd often come home to find them watching *Magnum P.I.* with their feet up on the furniture, the puppy leaping at their toes and being pacified with nibbles of junk food

For our twentieth wedding anniversary Frieda and Cory gave us two nights in a nice B&B—when we checked in we found a card on the table

- It was way better than Hallmark—they'd written a poem which included pages of happy memories of their childhoods—it was amazing and very touching how much they remembered

- They celebrated our decades of marriage by honoring the relationships that make our family special
- It was a turning point for all of us, as we began to relate together as adults

In today's reading Paul is writing to the community in Corinth about gifts

- "Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church." (1 Cor 14:12)
- For Paul, the concept of "gift" expresses the heart of the relationship between God and people:
  - It refers to the Covenant with Israel, chosen from among all the nations
  - It refers to the grace of the saving work of Christ
  - It refers to the gift of eternal life

God's gifts to us are freely given—they're not rewards or part of any bargain

- In Romans (6:23) Paul says that "the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"
- That gift was purchased by Christ's suffering on the Cross
- We'll never be worthy of it—but God generously offers it to us all the same

That's the background and foundation of Paul's writings about "spiritual gifts"

- The term may sound pretty elevated for ordinary people, especially when he says he wants us to "excel in them"
- Sometimes the Greek word referring to spiritual gifts is "pneumatica," from "pneuma," meaning spirit
- But more often it's "charismata," from "charis," meaning grace
- When we think of charismatic gifts we may imagine miraculous healings or people speaking in tongues
- But the more fundamental meaning is that spiritual gifts flow from the grace of God, given to us purely out of love
- One author suggested we might think of them as "spiritual graces"
- I like that because it makes the exercise of them seem more approachable—we don't have to be spiritual athletes, just people who respond gratefully to the gifts God gives us

I want to say several things about the nature of spiritual gifts

First, they're unique

- Every one of you has them, and they're all different
- Earlier in First Corinthians Paul wrote, "each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind." (*1 Cor 7:7*)
- In Romans he says, "We have gifts which differ according to the grace given us." (*Rom 12:6*)
- Since God loves every one of us as sons and daughters, we all have been given gifts—and you know how different we are from one another
- The question is not, Do we have gifts? but, Will we choose to use them?
- That's part of the free-will economy of God's kingdom—no one is forced to respond to God's generosity

Second, spiritual gifts are varied

- In First Corinthians alone there are several lists of these gifts, as well as one in Romans
- Generally they can be grouped under three headings:
  - *Gifts of utterance*: prophecy, the ability to distinguish between true and false prophecy, instruction, speaking in tongues, and interpreting tongues
  - *Gifts of practical ministry*: caring for the needy, serving, encouraging, contributing, performing acts of mercy, and administration
  - *Gifts of wonder-working faith*: healing, performing miracles (*Harper Collins Bible Dictionary, p. 1062*)
- Each of Paul's lists varies from the others, so we don't assume they're meant to be exhaustive
- Undoubtedly the needs of today's world require different gifts, and there were probably others from that day he didn't specifically mention

Finally, spiritual gifts are constructive

- First of all that means they're given to meet the needs of the world
- From the earliest days Christians were distinguished, not by their individual spiritual accomplishments, but by the ways in which they reached out to others
- Paul says that "If one member suffers, all suffer together." (1 Cor 12:26)
- If even your enemies are hungry, he writes, "feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink." (Rom 12:20)

But Paul goes on to emphasize that the deeper constructive purpose of spiritual gifts is to build up the Body of Christ

- "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." (1 Cor 12:12)
- What good is the ear without the eye, he asks, or the hand without the feet?
- Rather, "to each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good." (1 Cor 12:7)
- That brings us back to today's reading, "Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church." (1 Cor 14:12)
- When the Body of Christ is built up through the exercise of our gifts, we grow in faith as we respond to the needs of the world

So we see that spiritual gifts flow from the grace of God

- that every one of us has been given gifts, which vary dramatically from one person to another
- and that these gifts were given for constructive purposes: to meet other peoples' needs and to build up the church

Now I'd like to ask, What are the gifts God has given you?

In what unique ways can you touch the hearts and lives of others, in the process strengthening the Body of Christ?

What support and encouragement do you need in order to exercise your gifts more effectively?

Having laid all this groundwork, it's simply not possible to begin to treat such large questions at the end of my sermon

But the second session of our Lent series next month will be devoted to spiritual gifts, and we'll have more time to explore these questions and begin some exercises to identify your gifts

In the meantime I'd like to bring your attention to something you hear every week—one of those seemingly-simple statements from the Prayer Book that turn out to have many levels of meaning

Can you guess what I'm referring to?

“The Gifts of God for the people of God.”

Either Sandy or I say that in every service, after the Lord's Prayer and the breaking of the bread

Sometimes I leave off the following line (“take them in remembrance that Christ died for you...”), because those first nine words express so much: “The Gifts of God for the people of God.”

- The created world and life itself are gifts of God
- The incarnation of Jesus and our salvation are gifts of God
- His Body and Blood, which we receive every Sunday to remember his sacrifice, are gifts of God
- The “spiritual graces” we've all been given to serve others and build up the church are gifts of God
- And the promise of eternal life is a gift of God

Listen for this to be said at the table today

Think about what it means when Cammie sends you out by saying, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord!”

And ponder what unique gifts you've been given, and how you can use them in remembrance that Christ died for you

The Gifts of God for the people of God. Amen.