

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Gifts for the Body
1 Corinthians 12

The Corinthian Church was *anything* but ordinary. They were the church where opposites worshipped – slave and free, rich and poor, formerly pagan and formerly Jewish. They were a picture of diversity, but they were more. They were divided by those they said they followed, they snubbed the poor, encouraged the dissolution of marriages, yearned to be free from their “evil bodies,” chaotic in their worship, and pursued their freedoms and self-interests to the detriment of others.

They needed *a lot* of correction and guidance, but that was the *last thing* they wanted. As Paul heard about what was going on in the church and as he read their letter, he couldn't *help* but respond.

This morning, we explore the part of Paul's letter that we know as chapters 12 – 14. In these chapters, it is clear that the Corinthian Church believed that one spiritual gift was more important than all others, the gift of tongues. If you remember back to chapter 7 from a couple of weeks ago (I know that's asking a lot), this belief fits right in. In chapter 7, some in the church were encouraging people *not* to marry and were encouraging marriages to dissolve. They were doing this *most likely* because they believed that the body was a part of “this world.” They would one day shed their bodies and simply be spirits. The spirit was good and the body was evil. Anything spiritual, or otherworldly, was best.

And what could be more otherworldly than speaking in tongues? What could be more otherworldly than being wrapped up in an angelic, heavenly language that is beyond comprehension?

In Lutheran circles, we don't often talk about speaking of tongues. Because of that, we need to hear what it *is* and what it *isn't*. Speaking in tongues is *not* gibberish and it is *not* a foreign language; it is speaking a *heavenly* language. We know this because of what Paul writes in this section. In chapters 12 and 14, he references the gift of the *interpretation* of tongues. If tongues were gibberish, it would be untranslatable. In chapter 14 verse 2, he writes, "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not to men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit." And in verse 13, "Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unfruitful. What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also" (1 Cor 14:13 - 15). Ultimately, speaking in tongues is a prayer language that does *not* engage the mind of the one praying, but brings *encouragement* to that person. It becomes a benefit to *others*, when it is *interpreted*.

Paul writes that speaking in tongues is a *wonderful* gift from the Spirit. He even says that he wishes that *everyone* spoke in tongues (1 Cor 14:5). But, he goes to great lengths to say that speaking in tongues is not the *only* gift of the Spirit, nor is it the *best* gift.

My dad once pastored a church that was no run-of-the-mill Lutheran congregation. He was attracted to this church because they were open to the Spirit and open to the gifts of the Spirit.

But after a short while, my dad became concerned. Many *reveled* in the Spirit's otherworldly work, and went to conferences to develop their gifts. Some

thought that *everyone* should have the gift of speaking in tongues. *Some* who spoke in tongues created a hierarchy – those who spoke in tongues were better than those who did not. One even said that sharing the gospel was *not* the most important thing; experiencing the gifts of the Spirit *was*.

Do you see how this could be a problem? One gift is better than all others, those who do not have the gift are lesser than those who do, everyone should have this same gift, and the individual is central.

This is exactly Paul's argument. One gift is *not* better than all others, there is *no* hierarchy in the church, everyone should *not* have the same gift, and the individual is *not* central.

Paul begins his argument in chapter 12. He wants them to be informed about the things, or the gifts, of the Spirit. He wants them to be informed, because they were once led astray, and he doesn't want that to happen again. Theologian Gordon Fee writes that Paul's argument seems to imply that while they were led astray to follow idols, they heard or spoke otherworldly languages.¹ But since they were following idols, those languages were *not* of the Spirit. If they spoke otherworldly languages as pagans and now they speak an otherworldly language as Christians, how will anyone know the difference? How does someone discern if a language is pagan or of the Spirit? Paul writes in verse 3, "No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."

¹ Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 640.

Content is key. When *Jesus* is exalted as Lord, the Holy Spirit is at work. Whether in an angelic tongue or in a human tongue, the most *important thing* is that *Jesus* is central and worshipped. The most important thing is not what special gift the person has, but that *Jesus* is worshipped.

When Jesus was leaving his disciples, he promised them the Holy Spirit. He promised that the Spirit would give them power and would guide them in all truth. The *purpose* of the Spirit was not for their self-edification, to build their self-esteem. The *purpose* was that the Good News of Jesus Christ would be spread to all the world, that *all people* would come to know Jesus.

When Jesus is worshipped, God is glorified. When Jesus is worshipped, the Spirit is present.

In verses 4 – 6, Paul offers the next crucial point, and it is easy to miss. In so few words, he says that the church is *diverse* and yet *one*, just as God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet one. The church has been created with intentionality – to reflect God. God is three in one, and the church is many yet one.

The church has received many gifts of the Spirit, and each one is for the common good (1 Cor 12:7). Each gift is for the purpose of the building up of the church. No gift is intended for the person alone.

So what *are* the gifts of the Spirit? Wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, interpretation of prophecy, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Later, he says that the gifts are apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, gifts of healing, guidance, tongues, and interpretation of tongues.

But that's not all. In Romans and Ephesians, he offers *others*. As you may notice, some of these lists overlap and others don't.

What commonly happens is that all of these lists are combined and then listed as "The Spiritual Gifts." These are the options, and the goal is to determine which spiritual gift or gifts you have. Now, there is nothing *wrong* with trying to identify your spiritual gifts. It is a wonderful thing, to know what gifts you have to build up the church.

The problem, however, is that Paul's *purpose* in 1 Corinthians 12 is to argue that tongues is not the only gift. His *purpose* is to demonstrate a *diversity* of gifts, which includes, but is not limited to, and does *not* prioritize, tongues. Most likely, what he gives here is an *ad hoc* list. These are *some* of the spiritual gifts that come to Paul's mind as he thinks of the diversity of gifts given to the church.

All of these gifts are "the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines" (1 Cor 12:11). Just like any other gift, these gifts cannot be earned. There is nothing you or I can do to receive a different gift. The gifts are given by the Spirit as he sees fit.

This is not always easy to accept. It's *not* easy to accept that you don't have the same gifts as someone you admire. It's *not* easy to think that you are incomplete in yourself.

But that's just the point. We *are* incomplete in ourselves. You are incomplete and I am incomplete. We *need* each other's gifts; we need each other. The gifts you have been given, that you have been given, that you have been given, I have been

given, that all of us have been given, are for the building up of the body. Our gifts are not for ourselves; our gifts are for the body.

Paul's analogy of the body is so good, because it's immediately understandable. Each part of our body has a specific purpose. We wouldn't want to say "goodbye" to any of our body parts. Even the parts that we don't commonly see, like our organs and bones, have unique, specific purposes. It's a good thing we have them!

When our bodies are functioning as they should, we may hardly notice. We aren't in pain; there are no problems; life is good.

When our bodies *aren't* functioning as they should, our entire *lives* may be affected. We can't move without pain; we can hardly sleep; we can't do what we used to be able to do. We may be angry, sad, or depressed. It takes a conscientious effort to be content when our bodies aren't functioning as they should.

In many ways, it would seem easier not to *have* a body. Without a body, we wouldn't hurt, ache, get sick, age, or have to go to the doctor. But that was not how we were made. We were made with bodies.

And that was how the church was made, with a body. When one part suffers, all suffer together; when one part is honored, all rejoice together (1 Cor 12:26).

In our individualistic culture, it is easy to believe that life is all about us, that we can do it on our own. It's *easy* to think this when life is manageable, when we can succeed with our individual efforts. It's easy to think this, until we are in desperate need, and we come to the end of our rope.

But that's just it. We *are* in need. And it's not about you and it's not about me. It's about *Jesus*. And when he is glorified and the body of Christ is strong, others will see and they will begin to recognize him. What *is* this place, and who *are* these people, that they serve one another, that they care not for their self-promotion but for the good of others?

So use your gifts, whatever they may be, for the building up of the church. If you don't know what your gifts are, I encourage you to ask those close to you. What gifts do *they* see in you? Ask *yourself* – what is it that gives you life, that you naturally find yourself doing? What do others *thank* you for? Take a look at the ministries of the church and see what resonates with you. We have a list of our ministries in our Welcome Packets. Contact Elizabeth Hill, our Director of Discipleship and Connections, and ask what she might recommend for you. Try different ministries on for size. Are there ministries that bring you life, and on the other hand, are there ministries that drain you? And lastly, but most importantly, pray. Ask God what gifts He has given you to build up the body.

We are the body of Christ. May we use our diverse gifts to glorify Jesus and build up the body. Amen