

Many Gifts but One Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Intro

It's good to be back and meet you at the church. During our vacation, Juhee and I went to White Mountain, New Hampshire. We did our first winter hiking and snowshoeing and we really liked it. On a snowy day, we entered into the wood that was covered with snow. As we got into the deep forest, we could hear nothing but the sounds of our footsteps on snow. We felt that we are in a secluded area... away from all the noises and busyness of the world. And without distractions, we were able to fully immerse ourselves into that moment and enjoyed walking on deep snows and being together. It was only a couple of hours but the feeling of connectedness with the nature and God through the nature refreshed us.

Of course, after coming back from the vacation, many things need to be done. Particularly, the news about our denomination made my heart heavy. I bet many of you have already read or heard news about "the Protocol on Reconciliation and Grace Through Separation." News media has reported that the UMC has reached a deal to separate our denomination in terms of one's positions over homosexuality. But as I wrote in my weekly newsletter, it is just one of many proposals for 2020 General Conference. Until General Conference on May, nothing is for sure and we need to pray for our United Methodist Church.

Honestly, I have no power to change or influence on the outcome of the General Conference, nor do I have the answer over the issue of human sexuality. As a pastor serving a local church, my primary concern is how our beloved Asbury can stay together and continue to be a good church family, no matter the outcome of 2020 General Conference.

Can we stay together even though we may not reach to an agreement over certain issues including homosexuality? Would you continue to be Asbury church family even if the outcome of the General Conference does not cohere with your position? Can we do it? How can we do it? It's love. Our love for each other and Asbury UMC can make us stand together and continue to work together even if we don't agree for some issues. By sharing our life together... by serving and loving one another through spiritual gifts we have received from God, we can build up our church.

What Spiritual Gifts Do You Want to Receive?

Think of what gifts you have received from God and what gifts you have brought to our church. Think about it for a moment. What gifts have you brought to our church? (Choir with beautiful voice, chancel guild with beautiful gift of decorating our sanctuary, outreach team with compassionate heart for our neighbors.)

Do you know my best gift I bring to the church? Before I served my previous church, I thought my gifts were teaching the Bible study and visioning the future of the church. But it was not. The best gift that I had usually brought to churches that I served is my wife, Juhee Lee. During a church conference in my previous church, the district superintendent asked, “what do you give thanks for during this year?” People said what they were grateful for. And one member graciously answered, “our pastor!” And almost immediately, people in the meeting shout in unison “Juhee.” Then, I knew that the best gift that I have brought to the church is my wife, Juhee. I am sorry that I couldn’t bring my best gift to Asbury but you will have chance to meet her in February or at the parsonage.

What I would like to say is that we all have received unique gifts from God. God is generous. God gives without withholding anything. Right?

Spiritual gifts?

What spiritual gifts have you received? Do you know your spiritual gifts? It’s hard to tell, not because we do not receive spiritual gifts, but because the word ‘spiritual’ itself is very vague term.

When you hear the word, “spiritual gifts,” what first comes to your mind? When we think of “spiritual things,” we tend to think of something supernatural, extraordinary or an intense personal experience of the Holy Spirit like speaking in tongues, miraculous healing, seeing a vision, or a prophecy... something along these lines. We assume that “spiritual gifts” must be something sacred, extraordinary and powerful. It has to be different from ordinary gifts. So we hesitate to answer this question unless we have some really special spiritual experiences.

However, spiritual gifts do not have to be extraordinary or supernatural. Have you ever listened to someone struggling with their lives and gave them some comfort and counsel based on our Christian faith? According to today’s text, “wise counsel” is a spiritual gift. Do you trust Christ, our Savior? Simple trust is also a spiritual gift. Have you ever served other people during coffee hours? Serving others is also a spiritual gift.

Apostle Paul pointed out several lists of spiritual gifts in his letters to the churches. (PPT) As you can see on the screen, most spiritual gifts that God hands over to us do not always seem special. Giving, serving, compassion, helping, teaching, faith... all those spiritual gifts seem ordinary things we do every week. But these gifts are necessary for the church. God has given us various spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gift doesn’t always have to do with effectiveness. I know that many of you are not able to serve the church as you used to. When all of you were a little younger than now, you had actively served all church activities but you may no longer be able to do all these things. You may feel that you don’t have nothing to offer to others and the church. However, don’t forget that you still have invaluable spiritual gifts and no one can take these away from you.

After a joint worship service on Christmas Eve, one choir member of Zion church told me that he seriously considered quitting the choir because he felt that he is too old to do it. He is in his mid-seventies. In a joint choir, he was inspired and encouraged by Carl Bishop Sr., and changed his mind. He told me that he would be in the choir and praise God as long as he can. I bet Carl didn't say a word to him but your presence in a choir itself is an encouragement for some people. "Encouragement" is a very important spiritual gift.

My friends, God gives us spiritual gifts. Your wisdom, encouragement, and your very presence in the church itself can be invaluable gifts to others. So think of your spiritual gifts and share it with others. If the church is the full of faithful people with many different spiritual gifts, it is a blessing. Isn't it?

Corinthians Church

Of course, abundant spiritual gifts within the church does not always guarantee a "happy church life." The Corinthian church was a vibrant community where members received a variety of gifts from the Spirit. But at the same time, the church was well known for many problems. Many of them were in rivalries with other members. Some claimed that they were better than others because of their special spiritual gifts.

The problem of the Corinthians church was not the lack of spiritual gifts. Rather, the issue was that they did not know how to deal with these different gifts in the church and why God gave it to them.

What is your favorite color? Some people may like yellow and others may like white. Is yellow better than white? Is pink better than red? No! There is no superiority among colors and the same is true for spiritual gifts. All spiritual gifts, no matter what they are or how ordinary they look ... all spiritual gifts are God's grace. And there is no superiority among God's grace. Different spiritual gifts enrich our church life.

Imagine a church in which all members received only one spiritual gift, preaching. What would this church look like if all members of the church only have the gift of preaching? More importantly, do you want to be in that church full of preachers in which everyone wants to preach at you? Probably not.

The Beauty of Mosaic

Different spiritual gifts and ministries are necessary to build up the church. Some receive the gifts of prophecy and some have the gift of serving. Some commit themselves to a justice ministry, fighting against injustice in the world and in the church. Some commit themselves to keep a holiness of Christian life and the church by following the authority of the Bible and the church tradition. With these various spiritual gifts and ministries, we build the church together. There is no hierarchy among spiritual gifts and ministries because they all originate in God's Spirit.

The profound problem of the UMC today is a growing tendency of perceiving those who hold the opposite view over homosexuality as an enemy rather than brothers and sisters who also receive spiritual gifts and try to build the church. If the church is only full of fighters for justices, the church will be divided forever. If the church is only full of traditionalists who blindly holds the church tradition as an unchanging moral norm, the church will be an oppressive institution that seeks to maintain status quo of unjust social system. We need both groups of people and we need to respect each other and try to learn from each other, instead of blaming and fighting each other. I hope that our Asbury can be a model church in which a healthy dialogue between progressive, centralists, and traditionalists occurs and a mutual respect and love prevail in the church even if we do not agree over human sexuality.

Diverse spirituals gifts and different ministries in the church is God's blessing. As Paul says, "all these spiritual gifts have a common origin, which is the Spirit of God." And God has given us various spiritual gifts for the common benefit of all. Spiritual gifts and your ministries is valuable for the church.

[ppt] These pictures are Byzantine mosaics. Each piece of these tiles has distinctive shapes and colors. Perhaps, individually, these tiles look like nothing but pieces of broken pottery, which seems useless and meaningless. But as they were put together, it became a sacred picture that radiates the mystical beauty and glory of Jesus Christ. Like these mosaics, we become a holy body of Christ as we stand together and share our unique spiritual gifts for the benefit of other people.

[ppt] What do you see on the screen? It's a mosaic picture of our beloved church. As you can see, I made this image with pictures we have taken throughout last year. [ppt] Each picture captured a joyful memory of our life together and those beautiful moments become our church life story.

As we had drawn a graceful church story last year, I believe that we can draw another beautiful mosaic picture of the body of Christ and build a healthy church in Christ. I know this year will be a challenging year but we can still draw a beautiful picture of our church together if we love God and love our brothers and sisters as we love ourselves! I cannot do it alone. No one can do it alone. That's why God gives each one of us different spiritual gifts. Let us pray together and discern God's will for us during this time of uncertainty. And draw a beautiful mosaic picture of our beloved church on the 2020 canvas.

The Holy spirit, the divine painter and the greatest artist, will teach us and guide us while we are drawing and building our life story together as a church. Amen.