

## **Spirit Gifts...For the Common Good**

### **I. Introduction**

Let me begin by thanking the Session for the invitation to preach and lead worship this morning -- not only because this is the first Sunday following Debra's retirement as your pastor, but also because it gives me the precious opportunity to allow God's Word to speak into the midst of your life as a congregation at this time.

Whenever a congregation loses its pastor, a host of emotions and dynamics are released into its life. For some, there may be a feeling of abandonment -- how will we survive as a church without Debra? How can she do this to us? For still others, there may be confusion about what happens next, about who you now are as a gathering of God's faithful (without Debra), even fear and anxiety about changes to come. The task for the preacher on a morning such as this is to first to bring the reassurance that God has not abandoned you, and second to help you begin to envision a way forward.

Many of you will recall that in the book of Exodus, Moses was called to lead God's people out of slavery in Egypt, home to the land promised to their forefathers and mothers (Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and their descendents). Moses led them through a great time of transition through which they learned again what it meant to be God's chosen people even in the midst of danger, wilderness wanderings, and confusion over other gods. With the help of his father-in-law, Jethro, he organized them so that there would be teams of elders among the people, listening and judging, reporting on the needs of the people, and serving as interpreters of God's Word and direction for them as the people of Israel. Finally, when years later they were within sight of the promised land, Moses died and a new leader--Joshua-- with different gifts and skills appropriate to a new set of challenges, was given the task of leading them across the river Jordan.

I am NOT trying to say that Debra was your Moses! I remind you of this biblical story so that you can hold on to one of Debra's final instructions in her sermon last week: **DO NOT BE AFRAID!** God is in your midst, and **WILL** raise up leaders to accompany you through 2016 and beyond. In fact, this process is already well underway, as the Session has written a description of your pastoral leadership needs for this "interim" time, that description has already been approved by the Committee on Ministry, and they are ready to consider applications for the position of Interim Pastor.

Why an "interim" pastor? Because congregations need a period of time in which both to grieve the loss of beloved pastor and to assess who they are before they can truly commit (emotionally, spiritually, psychologically) to a new permanent pastor. The Committee on Ministry (on which your own Sue Shanno served) will walk with you as a congregation, and with the Session as your leadership team throughout this process. Two liaisons, plus the chairpersons of the Committee on Ministry, will accompany you through the hiring of an interim pastor, right up to the point at which you issue a call to your next "permanent" pastor, and then as he or she and YOU begin to settle in to life together.

Will there be CHANGE? Of course; it is inevitable, and would be so even if Debra were still here. A new pastoral leader is bound to see things that may have been overlooked as you and Debra got comfortable with each other over the last fifteen years -- much as, over time, we tend no longer to notice the crack in the plaster in the living room, or see all the little repair and renewal projects needed in our homes. He or she will point new things out to you, working with the Session to assess which need attention and which can be left alone. His or her style will likely be different from Debra's, and you will need to get used to that. But there will also be much CONTINUITY, as your worship life continues to resound with multiple languages and the celebration of the Sacraments, you continue to grow in ministry to and with the community that surrounds you, and you -- collectively -- care for and uphold each other in life and in death. You ARE beloved by God, and will continue to be held and nurtured and strengthened and commissioned and sent out by God's Word and Spirit.

## **II. All of 1st Corinthians: an impassioned plea for unity in the church**

This morning's Scripture lesson is probably familiar to most of you -- a discussion of the role and value of "spiritual gifts" in the life of the congregation at Corinth. The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian church out of deep concern for them, as he has received news of dissension among them. They are quarreling among themselves over who they should follow. Some of them are "preening" (just as a peacock preens), displaying their wealth before others -- to the point of eating sumptuous feasts while others have little to eat at their Agape meals. They are competing with each other for status, even pointing to their ability to "speak in tongues" in worship as a spiritual gift of a higher order than that of others.

The whole of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians can be described as an impassioned plea for unity in the church. Located on a busy trade route in the Aegean Sea, Corinth had all the benefits -- and many of the challenges -- of today's New York City. Diverse in every way possible, the church at Corinth reflected in microcosm those same attributes. At their best, the diversity within the body offered a foretaste of the great banquet feast in the Kingdom of God to come, where slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female were equal not only in God's sight but in the sight of

every member of the community. But the young church also reflected the tendencies of the City of Corinth towards hyper-individualism and status-consciousness.

### **III. Counter-cultural: everyone is gifted**

In chapter twelve, Paul sets out to disabuse his listeners of the notion that one "spiritual gift" is of greater value and importance than any other. All spiritual gifts are inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are present in the community FOR THE COMMON GOOD. One person may have the gift of prophecy, another of discernment. Later in the chapter we hear about gifts of teaching and leadership, of healing and service. Each and every one of the gifts present in Christian community have their source and their strength in the Spirit's determination to shape the body for ministry, and no one can be considered better than another. In fact, ALL gifts of the Spirit that are present in the body of Christ must be regulated, shaped by the "greater gifts" (I Cor 12: 31) of faith, hope, and love.

Have you ever wondered the origin of the word "commonwealth" in the names of four of our States: the Commonwealths of Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Kentucky? (Personally, I covet that title for all fifty states in the United States.) "Commonwealth" is an archaic term, drawn from Middle English, to denote the general good of the people. Ideally, and in the minds of their founders, the states of MA, PA, VA, and KY all exist to promote the general good of their residents.

In the same way, the Apostle Paul declares that all spiritual gifts are intended for the common wealth, the common good of the body of Christ. They are gifts for service to the community.

### **IV. Epiphany - gifts of the Spirit for the common good**

Ten days ago, the church around the world celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany, the day on which the three wise men -- the magoi -- were said to have at long last found the new King of the Jews, the baby Jesus. It is a colorful story, filled with mystery, drama, danger, promise, and joy. Three wise men from the mysterious East; Persia, perhaps, but of such stature that they could request and obtain a hearing with King Herod. An unexpected question: Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? The convening of all the priests and councilors, and a scarier-still answer: "Not just any baby, but the Messiah," said Scripture, "the Savior, born in Bethlehem, just a day's walk from Jerusalem." "How did you know about his birth?" queries Herod. And then things get really interesting: "We saw his star at its rising in the East and have followed it here, where it has stopped." A cool and crafty Herod implores them to find the child in Bethlehem, and to send word to him, so that he, too, can pay him homage. You know the rest: the star continues to shine its guiding light until it hovers over a humble abode in Bethlehem. The discovery of a young couple with a child - who knows how old at this point. The three magi going to their knees in front of him, filled with joy. The offering of gifts from their saddle bags - gold,

frankincense, and myrrh. Dreams that come to warn both the magi and Joseph and Mary of danger. The eventual departure of the magi by another route, and of Joseph and Mary for Egypt.

The problem with this brief but dramatic story is that we are SO familiar with its details that becomes hard to hear a fresh word from God through it. As we think about the spiritual gifts present in this congregation this morning, we are going to briefly take a second look at the Epiphany story. We are going to focus not on the giving of gifts to the Christ child, but on the **receiving** of them. Keeping in mind that *all spiritual gifts come to us from God, to use for the common good of this congregation*, we are each going to receive a "star gift," one that comes to us serendipitously, conveyed in the same offering plates into which we place our weekly gifts to the Lord. It will be the gift of a word, a single word, for each of us to hold close in our hearts throughout this time of transition, this in-between time, this unsettled time, pondering how God might be speaking to us through it.

The wise men - whether they were named Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar or not - the wise men who traveled great distances to offer their gifts to the newborn Christ-child were **responding to a gift first given to them**. They were given a star, a guiding light, the promise of a redeemer breaking into the suffering and sorrow of their world to bring new life. They received God's gift in awe and wonder, and then offered their gifts to God - gifts of adoration and commitment and praise and thanksgiving and persistence and faithfulness.

Pass the offering plate among you, and to take one of the yellow stars from it. They are all upside-down, so just reach in and take one. Then turn it over and look at the word printed on it. (No two are alike -- I've chosen about a hundred words from a list of 350.) What does it say? **Speak them out.**

This way of reflecting on the meaning of Epiphany- using "star gifts" -gives each of us the opportunity to "be still" in the presence of God and to receive God's gifts. It's not because we have done anything to merit God's attention, but simply because God is abundantly generous with God's love. **Be still now** for a moment with the word printed on the star.

Perhaps you are amazed at how readily it speaks to you. "Patience?" Exactly what I need in my life. Perhaps you are puzzled. What does "perseverance" have to do with me? A year or so ago, in my husband's congregation, a married couple pulled out their "star gifts" and turned them over to read the words printed on them. "Amazing," they told Paul. "Susan received the gift of the word 'patience,' and Joe received the word 'understanding.' Exactly what we need."

To be honest, we Presbyterians are so good at being busy and "doing" for God. We are compassionate people who spend hours writing cards to the sick, cooking meals for Loaves and Fishes, providing transportation to the homebound, calling on people in hospitals and nursing homes, participating in English conversation classes, serving on the Session or Board of Deacons, praying for those in need, preparing for and leading worship, giving our time and energy to leading the church. Maybe, just maybe, "being busy" has become today's "status symbol" in the church.

## **V. Conclusion**

But that is not God's intention for you, for me, for the Presbyterian Church at Leonia. Rather, it is God's intention that we would dwell in the Word - the Word made flesh in Jesus, and the Word revealed to us in Scripture -- and BEFORE allowing ourselves to be caught up in the church's "business," we pause to open ourselves to the gifts of the Holy Spirit to each and all of us for ministry through this congregation. As the opening words of the service of Ordination and Installation proclaim, straight from I Corinthians 12, "YOU are the body of Christ, and individually members of it."

As you enter this in-between, unsettled time, God's Word calls you to consider the gifts the Spirit has given you, those of your brothers and sisters, and to open yourselves to new gifts that the Spirit seeks to give you.

Amen. Let us pray.