



Sermon Preached by Greg Jones  
"Will You Save or Share Your Gifts?"  
January 31, 2010  
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Fred Craddock "received an unusual piece of mail from the daughter of a longtime friend. It was a slip of paper that had been taken from a note pad at a Holiday Inn. The note had been torn from the pad and folded to fit into a man's wallet. Judging from the condition of the paper, it had been in that wallet for years. There were words written on this slip of paper and when the daughter mailed it she attached a note. 'We were cleaning out Dad's personal effects and I came across this. I tossed it away, but then I retrieved it. I remembered that you had been his friend longer than I had been his daughter so I thought you might understand what he wrote. I don't have a clue'."

Here's what the note said: "What shall I do with the gift? I with my hands not receiving; I with my heart unbelieving; I in my loneliness grieving; what shall I do with the gift?"<sup>1</sup>

Do you understand what he meant? He was asking, "What shall I do with the gift of my life?" God had given him the gift of existence and he wondered if he was using his time wisely, living the way God intended. Yet, it was more than that. It was not simply the gift of life he pondered, he also reflected on the unique gifts he possessed. God had given him certain gifts and the note in his wallet reminded him of his responsibility to use them.

This morning's reading comes from one of the letters Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. It's apparent from his tone that this was a congregation in chaos. The faithful were bickering over who had the most valuable gift. Those who had the gift of wisdom claimed their gift was superior to those who had the gift of healing. Those who possessed the gift of faith argued that their gift surpassed the gift of prophecy. We can imagine a gathering of the faithful quickly degenerating into a cacophony of competing voices. One cries, "My gift carries more weight than yours!" Another retorts, "You must be mad. Surely my gift is more beneficial." Paul became distressed that their haughtiness would rend the fabric of their community, so he dispatched his letter in hopes of deflating the discord.

"There are a *variety* of gifts," Paul declared, "but they all emanate from God's Spirit. There are *many* ways of serving, but they all serve the same God." Paul urged them to go beyond their pettiness to consider why God had given them different gifts in the first place. It was not to create a pecking order, but rather to serve the common good.

Today, we face a different problem than that first century congregation. Our problem is not that some of us trumpet our gift as superior to others; our problem is that many of us fail to recognize or utilize our gifts.

What special gifts do you possess? And how do you use them to enhance God's kingdom on earth? These are weighty questions that get to the heart of your purpose in life.

Some people deny their gifts. I remember several of us trying to encourage Carol to work with our youth. It was obvious that one of her chief gifts was the gift of teaching. She had a passion for learning and she had a way of generating enthusiasm in others. We asked our senior highs whom they would like to have teach their class. Her name rose to the top. We approached her and said, "We would love for you to teach our senior high class."

"Oh, no," she replied, "I couldn't do that."

"Sure you could. You would do a marvelous job!"

"No, that takes someone special."

"But, you have a great way with people and you relate well with young people."

"Sorry you have the wrong person!"

Some people deny their gifts. Perhaps they don't want the burden of responsibility that comes with them. Or maybe they have gotten sidetracked and they're spending too much energy on matters of little value. God is whispering in their ears, presenting fresh opportunities to do something that will give authentic substance to their lives. But, they are tuned to other voices.

What do you do with your gifts?

Seminary professor Fred Craddock remembers a student who had a very special gift. He said that in his 35 years as a seminary professor, this young man was in the top five in terms of preaching potential. Professor Craddock said that in his introductory preaching class most students would deliver a quivering sermon and everyone in the class would try to be generous in their evaluations. Sometimes the most positive comment they could muster was, "Well, it wasn't that long."

But "when this particular young man stood up and preached, they could not even give evaluations. They were mesmerized. They just bumped into the furniture as they left the room. The young man graduated, returned to his home state and took a small church. The first Sunday, he did not appear in the pulpit. They waited for him to show up; they sang another hymn. They went in search of him in this small town. He was out in the public park, sitting on a picnic table tossing rocks into the lake. He said, 'I just couldn't do it. I just couldn't.'"

"They said, 'We know you're nervous. You have a week to get over it.'"

"The next week he appeared in the pulpit and after the service at 1:20 p.m., he wrote Dr. Craddock a note. 'Dear Prof: Today I dropped a stone in the water, whether there will be ripples or whether they will reach the shore, remains to be seen.' About three days later, his widow – yes, his widow – called Dr. Craddock to say: 'With the help of a silver-handled 38 revolver, he returned the gift to God.' No thanks."<sup>2</sup>

Some recognize their gifts but feel weighted down by the responsibility to use them. They believe they must be perfect. They set the bar impossibly high and when they realize they cannot possibly attain it, they give up.

God knows we will make mistakes; God does not expect perfection. But God does expect us to use our gifts to the best of our ability. And when we do, something wonderful happens. The days are brighter, the friendships are deeper and the joyful times are more abundant.

Often, when we think of someone who is gifted, we imagine an exceptional person who possesses an amazing talent that distinguishes him/her from the rest of us. The child prodigy whose playing of the violin dazzles the crowd. Or the teacher with encyclopedic knowledge who speaks eloquently and inspires every student. Or the saint who dedicates her life to caring for the

dying. However, God does not only give special gifts to a handful of highly talented people. God has given you gifts and hopes you will use them as often as you can.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that she “cannot think of half a dozen people who believe that they are doing exactly what God has called them to do. Instead, they are waiting to find out what their true purpose is, or else they are waiting until circumstances improve enough for them to do a better job of fulfilling it. They think: Things will be different once school is over or once there has been time to get more experience or once the right job comes along or once the children are grown or the house is paid off. Until then, one thing is for sure: this is not it...this cannot possibly be what God had in mind.”<sup>3</sup>

Could it be that we have not clearly identified our gifts? Or that we have become lax in putting them to good uses?

Sin seduces us into thinking we do not have any gifts or that the gifts we possess are too meager. Never fall for such deception. Each day new opportunities arise and God whispers in our ears to use our gifts to enrich the lives of others. No one can do everything, but everyone can do something. Your job is to figure out what you do well, what gives you energy, what gives you a feeling of joy and satisfaction, and contributes to the wellbeing of others. Those are your gifts.

God has given us gifts so that we can work miracles. You can help a friend rediscover her worth after her marriage has ended. You can inspire confidence in a child who is terrified of failing. You can welcome a stranger who is looking for a friendly face and warm hospitality. You can be generous in giving.

Each of you has unique gifts. Each of you has opportunities for using your gifts. Keep your eyes peeled for the special moments that present themselves and keep your ears open for God’s whispers so that you can use your gifts to produce joy, to produce meaning to produce hope.

I suspect most of us have more gifts than we are willing to acknowledge. Who do you suspect is being short changed?

## NOTES

1. Fred Craddock, “What Shall I Do with the Gift?” Festival of Homiletics in Atlanta, Georgia, May 2009.
2. Ibid.
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, “True Purpose,” in *Christian Century*, February 21, 2001, p. 30.