

Perhaps it is no surprise that there was conflict in the church. It was under constant pressure from incorporating new members and from the societal forces that threatened its very existence. In the particularities of today's scripture reading the conflict seems to be about talents or gifts with some members claiming to have a superior place in the community. These members could speak in tongues, that is to say that they were able to enter into an ecstatic state which caused them to speak incoherently and left them with a deep conviction that they had been inhabited by the Holy Spirit herself. This claim to superior gifts created resentment within the fellowship and caused the church in Corinth to write to their mentor seeking advice.

The 12th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians contains his response to this crisis. He offers them three pieces of advice for resolving their conflict. First, any claim to a spiritual gift must be grounded in the knowledge and love of Jesus, the source of the Christian life. Second, spiritual gifts are many and diverse and there is no hierarchy to them. And, perhaps most fundamentally, spiritual gifts **MUST** serve the common good. Let us briefly return to each of these criteria.

First, any claim to a spiritual gift must be grounded in the knowledge and love of Jesus, the source of the Christian life. Paul is more succinct in

his instruction simply stating that those claiming spiritual gifts must be willing to declare that 'Jesus is Lord.' Though deceptively simple on its surface, this claim makes a radical political statement. To claim that Jesus is Lord is also to claim that Caesar and other human leaders are **not**. To make such a claim opened the individual to a host of potentially negative consequences. In ancient Corinth those consequences could be imprisonment, or even death. In contemporary North America the consequences of declaring that Jesus is my Lord are not quite so lethal but can result in ridicule, ostracism or having your viewpoint quickly dismissed. Paul is insisting that rather than giving a person a place of prestige, the exercise of spiritual gifts in the name of Jesus requires the courage to stand apart from the powerful of the world.

Second, spiritual gifts are many and diverse and there is no hierarchy among them. In the tight knit Christian community of ancient Corinth Paul's enumerating of spiritual gifts is circumspect. He names only service, wisdom, knowledge, and healing alongside that of speaking in tongues, but he concludes by emphasizing, "But it is one and the same spirit who does all of this, as she wishes, she gives a different gift to each person."

In some contemporary Christian circles there is a renewed interest in defining spiritual gifts. I googled 'spiritual gifts' and came up with no less

then six sub-categories for identifying one's spiritual gifts including a test, list, assessment, survey, inventory, and quiz. Out of curiosity I thought I would complete the quiz but when I selected that web site my security program cut in warning me of all kinds of potential hazards. Perhaps it was the Spirit's way of reminding me that she is the author of such gifts and not some algorithm.

According to Paul, spiritual gifts are not special qualities for individual enhancement but are designed to serve the common good. Paul writes, "The Spirit's presence is shown in some way in each person for the good of all." For Paul, the Spirit is not Santa-Claus-like doling out longed-for presents for the sake of individual enjoyment, rather the Spirit bestows gifts based on what will most contribute to the good of the whole community. Spiritual gifts are not intended for self-promotion or to earn a good salary or to garner the admiration of others. Paul wants the Corinthians to adopt a new way of looking at spirituality by seeing individual abilities as a means to serve and enhance the whole community. When our various talents are transformed into spiritual gifts they are oriented away from us and our own interests and become a vehicle for God's love to be enacted in the world.

All of this talk about spiritual gifts seems pretty abstract unless we can see them at work in a person's life. I had the privilege the other day to

speaking with Laura about her experience of spiritual gifts and she was gracious enough to allow me to share this conversation with you. I think you will see how the Holy Spirit has been active in Laura's life. She shared with me that her spiritual life began in earnest at a low point in her life. Her entry into the A.A. program created a desire to know more about spirituality and so she returned to the church of her childhood seeking the Holy. To her surprise she found an immediate welcome and an invitation to lead the youth group. The community immediately recognized the spiritual gifts that Laura was not even aware of. And so, in the midst of such affirmation, she immediately responded, "I can't do that." Her response reminds me of so many Biblical characters whose first reaction to God's nudging caused them to turn and run the other way. Moses claimed he couldn't speak, Jonah ran off and got swallowed by a fish and Peter protested that he was unworthy to even untie the sandals of Jesus. Laura told me that she was ultra honest with the community about why she shouldn't get involved but the Spirit was persistent, and Laura eventually took the bold step into leadership. She was designated a staff associate and spent two years supporting youth in Melfort to embrace and live out the Christian faith. That was enough she concluded, she allowed that she could be a lay youth leader and that's all, full stop!

The Spirit wasn't convinced and sent other signs and messages that her gifts could be enhanced. With a combination of reluctance and excitement she set out on a period of study at the Centre for Christian Studies culminating in her commissioning as a diaconal minister. This might seem like a straightforward educational plan but every step of the way there was lingering hesitation and self doubt. She was a recovering alcoholic, was raising a child as a single parent, and had embraced her sexual orientation. Despite these self-doubts she dared to say that Jesus is Lord and in response Jesus said to each of her hesitations, 'I love you, I love you, I love you. (As an aside, it is not likely that Laura said 'Jesus is Lord' with all the patriarchal legacy of that term, it is more likely she acknowledged Jesus as the revealer of love, the passion for justice and the builder of community – which caused her to conclude, 'I want to walk in this way.' Let us be reminded that such a declaration is viewed by many in our culture with suspicion and even contempt but Laura had courage for she had found life in the Spirit.

With her declaration in place Laura was willing to let the Spirit guide her to places where she could share her gifts. First, she was called to Winnipeg's Rainbow ministry where she supported the LGBTQ community by offering compassion and seeking justice. The spirit nudged again, and

she found herself in an interview with the search committee of McClure United Church. Here she was called to a ministry with children and to support the Stephen Ministries program. She confided in me that when Kent Mohn left, and she was asked to include youth ministry in her portfolio, she was hesitant and agreed to serve in that role but only for six months. As it was, the youth themselves helped Laura realize the gifts she had for relating to and with them, and she evolved a passion for ministry with the youth.

Perhaps we are better able to identify the gifts with which the Spirit has blessed Laura: a passion for justice-making and community building; a compassionate and listening ear; a willingness to be vulnerable through which she liberated others to do the same; endless creativity leading to rainbow sidewalks and province-wide worship connections; the tenacity for Easter vigils and the savvy to keep candy in her office. As St. Paul said to the church at Corinth the Spirit is endlessly creative in her gifting and it would seem that Laura has received bountifully of the Spirit's generosity.

It appears to me that the most important wisdom that St. Paul offered regarding spiritual gifts is that they are designed for the common good. I was bold in asking Laura what spiritual gifts she identified in herself. I expected her to name the diaconal qualities of service, education and

pastoral care. Or, perhaps, to claim some of her local talents as a youth facilitator or media guru ... but Laura didn't name any of those things. After a moments pause she concluded that the Spirit had allowed her to recognize the power in vulnerability and the need to affirm worth in herself and others. I wrote down some of her own words: "I moved from floundering to purpose and want to support others to do the same." "I've seen people living lives of secrecy and shame, not believing in themselves and I want to enable them to recognize their own worth and to know that they are deserving of God's love." It seems to me that Laura aspires to a common good where each will recognize their own value as a precious child of a loving Creator.

Of course the Spirit's gifts are not only, or even most importantly, found in those who work for the church. Rather the Spirit wants to gift each of you with the gifts that will create God's commonwealth among us. By virtue of showing up here this morning you have taken the vulnerable and hopeful step of declaring that 'Jesus is Lord' ... that Jesus is the motivator and mentor that inspires your living. As such you have each been given gifts – some of compassion or creativity or service or grace or justice-seeking or banner making or refugee supporter or rainbow painter or prayer mate or board member – with which together we can continue to shape a

commonwealth where the vulnerabilities of life are safely acknowledged and the inherent worth of you AND your neighbour are affirmed. May the Spirit of God continue to shower all of us with the gifts needed to ensure that no one is left behind, to ensure that all know love, to support us in creating heaven on earth. Amen.