

Gifts of the Spirit Abound

1 Corinthians 12: 3b-13; John 7: 37-39

Surrender. Surrender to the startling embrace of the divine. This prayer and call comes to us from Shawn Copeland.¹ It is a prayer I use to start every Sunday morning, as I prepare myself for worship. And so, join with me today in that prayer. *Help us, gracious God, to surrender; to surrender to the startling embrace of your divine spirit. Amen.*

Today's scripture is a famous one and it's a beautiful one; affirming of all the gifts and spirits with which God imbues us. *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

This week has been difficult. Many of my colleagues have noted that while they normally begin writing their sermons down early in the week, we cannot at this time. We have all realized that while we need to open our bibles early in the week, we can no longer write anything down until the end of the week. By then the newspaper has let us know what the news this week brings. Different updates on where the world is, and where we as Albertans are, in the pandemic come in. So too does the news of everyday life that continues: its blessings, its struggles and its pain. And so, the middle part of my sermon today has been rewritten many times. I want to open as I would open no matter the news.

You are imbued with a startling expression of God, unique to you. There will be times when the startle factor will come from those around you. Perhaps you've had a moment where a parent or guardian turned to you and thought, "wow don't know where you got that." It might have been the first time you passed a math exam or the first time you opened your mouth and sang. There are, of course, also gifts that we receive from our parents, our guardians, and our community; little gifts that start as embers until that junior choir leader grabs our hand or until that coach in elementary school watches us run. Lastly, there are gifts no one notices in an external way, but rather in smaller ways. Perhaps, along your journey, you have helped strangers out and so somewhere in the world today there are 50 strangers who say to themselves, "oh my I still remember that stranger, the gift of kindness that they gave to me." Your gift startled them with love!

¹ *Knowing Christ Crucified.* M. Shawn Copeland. Orbis Books, 2018.

Karen named some of the “spirited” gifts that we have seen at work here in our community, both inside our membership and of course all the participants in and outside this building and now all outside this building. We see joy, we see wisdom and we hear cries for justice. Paul lifted up such gifts as the working of miracles, healing, and discernment. In you there is a startling expression of the divine.

The other aspect of being startled is perhaps when we ourselves are startled, not just someone else. This might be the first time that you try something new and, while it's going to get you a lot of practice to get great, it feels easier than other people said it would. Perhaps when you sit down at a piano instead of thinking ‘oh no’, you enjoy it... having so much fun practicing you don't even realize it's really hard work for the rest of us. I think of the scientists who delight and strive to find cures for illness using languages and tools I've never understood. What gifts of the spirit they hold in their minds and their bodies, the patience they have knowing that every time an experiment fails, they are one step closer to their goal. Every failure is a gift for scientists because they learn so much. And that is how it is with all our gifts.

When have you been startled? Are you a good joke teller, but it always startles you when people laugh at your jokes? Are you someone who's patient but you never notice that until someone turns around and says. “how did you do that? That three-year-old ran around this room 14 times and you just delighted in it.” We are all imbued with a startling expression of the Holy Spirit and, as Paul says, all these gifts, all of this Spirit, are to be shared. Each gift of the Spirit is for the common good. They're not given to us to play with and throw out. They are not given to us to keep in a special box hidden. They are meant literally to be common, to be shared.

The Prophet Micah (6:1-3):

Hear what the Lord says, rise, plead your case before the mountains and let the hills hear your voice. Hear you, mountains the controversy of the Lord, hear you enduring foundations of earth,
God has a controversy with the people. God will contend with us. Oh, my people what have I done, in what have I wearied you?

I have given you so much. I have given you languages, so many languages. I even gave you body languages. All this so that you could communicate with others whether they could hear what their ears or they heard with their eyes or read with their fingertips, I gave you languages, multitudes, and multitudes.

And you still use violence. It's not a language. It has no deeper meaning. It is death; death to those who practice it, death to those who receive it. I gave you a multitude of languages. How dare you still use violence to try and communicate your fears and vulnerabilities, your envy, and your greed. In our hymn, this morning we hear that “when we are blinded by idols and lies,” God will blow through prophets, God will blow and clear our eyes and our hearts so we may understand, so that it may be revealed to us in a multitude of ways how unjust our ways are.

Our ways are unjust when we have idols, thinking that some things are more worthy than others, some people's lives are more worthy than others, some people's actions can be judged differently than other people's even if the action is the same. Let's say, putting on a mask and showing up at a governor's home to say 'NO.' Now is that person standing up for their rights or is that person rioting? Again, the wonders of God's language that we have received, we use to commit more violence.

Our idols beget lies. This is when violence is quieter, quieter ways of injustices that sometimes don't even make the news. Some of these lies do not look like idols, big strong pieces of gold shining out, rather they are lies quietly spoken.

When we call those over 85, "just those over 85." Or perhaps when we call a pandemic disease, "the flu".² It can happen when we think or say, "well, *I* can do it so it's okay that not everyone can. I'm not afraid so why is anyone else?" These are quiet thoughts, words and actions that need to be brought forward to God in confession. These are when our minds are trying to condense God's complexity and the world's structures into black and whites, into good and bad. All of that tries to shut out the most extraordinary news that we are all imbued, gifted in-spirited and inspired by a startling love, a startling truth teller Jesus the Christ, who says that no matter a person's religion, colour, gender identity, sexual orientation, economic or health status, no matter whether they are over 85 or under; all our beloved, equal children of God.

I do not know what all your amazing and unique spirited gifts are. Those of you I know, I miss because I know some of your gifts. May God, who is beyond our understanding, bless us and forgive us. May God help us to find the spiritual gifts within us that will help us challenge each day the lie that some are more important than others and the lie that violence can solve anything. Rather oh God help us remember the gifts of your languages your arts and music, words and body languages that shout out the great news: we are loved, we are forgiven and set free and we are welcome at God's table to break bread and to be refreshed so we may continue to be spirited people of God. Amen and Hallelujah.

² This is a reference to current Premier of Alberta who highlighted that Covid impacts mostly seniors and "during debate in the legislature on Wednesday, Kenney referred to the virus as "an influenza of this nature." This was no slip of the tongue. He used the term "influenza" six times." Graham Thomson's editorial, CBC, May 29, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-premier-jason-kenney-covid-19-1.5589419>