

Everyone Matters

I Corinthians 12
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I think of First Corinthians 12 as the classic commentary affirming every person's value in the church community. The church in Corinth had been struggling with issues of whose gifts and talents were more important than the gifts and talents of others. Little jealousies had cropped up, unhealthy competitions among the church members regarding whose spiritual gifts were of the greater importance. It grieved the Apostle Paul to no end to hear about this in-fighting; thus, his letter comparing the many essential roles in the church to the many essential organs in the human body.

His point, simply spoken, is that no one is expendable, that everyone matters! Without everyone's participation, the church sputters like a six cylinder engine chugging along with only five pistons doing their work. When anyone's talent is overlooked or under-appreciated, the whole community suffers the loss.

Just as a human body needs hands and feet and ears and eyes; a church community needs singers and prayers and knitters and ushers and teachers and banner makers.

Just as a human body needs a mind and a heart and a pair of lungs; a church community needs visitors and builders and sweepers and folders and computer technicians and parish nurses.

Just as a human body needs fingers and toes and muscles and joints and bones; a church community needs preachers and flutists and drummers and saxophonists and bell ringers and lasagna chefs and coffee percolators and song leaders.

I can tell you this: the churches that are thriving are the churches that are intentional about discerning each person's talent, valuing that talent, and engaging that talent in its ministry and mission.

I love it that Tom came recently with his Hawaiian guitar and played sacred music for our prelude to worship. I love it that Lisa has offered her talent as a Yoga instructor to raise funds for Haitian relief. I love it that Dave has a secret recipe for spaghetti sauce that he uses for the youth-in-mission pasta supper. I love it that MaryElva has a flair for weaving and is willing to share that gift with her church family.

I admit to watching, every once in awhile, the TV show, America's Got Talent. And we all tuned in to Britain Has Talent when Susan Boyle sang her heart out. **Here's the thing:** God blesses every local church with all the talent they'll ever need to fulfill the call God has placed in their hands. For example: I believe with all my heart that God has called South Church to be a beacon of light to the youth in our town. And...God has given the spiritual gifts needed for this ministry to plenty of adults who are stepping up to claim that calling.

For example: I believe with all my heart that God has called South Church to be a beacon of light at Salmon Brook Convalescent Home. And God has blessed a whole team of volunteers with spiritual gifts to lead worship there, to visit the residents there, to be a living witness there to God's redeeming love.

For example: I believe with all my heart that God has called South Church to be a refuge for men and women living with addictions; addictions to alcohol, to drugs, to food, to gambling, to whatever robs them of their dignity.

And God has blessed us with a warm building where 12 step programs meet, where people from all walks of life find sobriety; and God has blessed us with pastoral counselors and therapists and partner agencies to be instruments of healing.

For example: I believe with all my heart that God has called us to be a praying church, to pray like crazy for the mending of the world's broken places, to pray for the sick and the mourners and those in various transitions. And, sure enough, God has also blessed many of you with a talent for prayer, a voice for praise, a gift for meditation. You gather regularly for prayer and you convene us on Sunday evenings for healing services.

I could go on in this vein for some time. The point of Paul's letter is clear: everybody matters; everyone's spiritual gifts are needed. God places a ministry in the hands of a local church and then God raises up people with the spiritual gifts required for leadership. A church that is intentional about discerning the spiritual gifts of its members doesn't relegate that responsibility to any one committee or to a paid staff. It falls to all of us to tune in to each other, to tune in to the spiritual gifts God has provided and to nurture those gifts.

I know of a number of poets in this church. How might this gift of theirs be used to build up the realm of God? The Rev. Edward Taylor wrote an original poem every week for 50 years as a call to worship for the morning service at First Church in Westfield, Massachusetts. How might our poets use their talent here, today?

I know of a number of story tellers in this church. Is there not a hunger for a good story? Could there be an explosion of story telling around here?

I know there are quilters among us. What's keeping us from an old-fashioned quilting bee or a new-fashioned quilting bee?

I know there are bakers in this church. What difference would it make to them or to us if they were invited to bake the Communion bread each month?

I know there are drama people among us, probably just waiting to be asked to produce a chancel drama, a morality play, a Sophocles theatrical evening. I could go on in this vein for some time.

When Lucia Ann Jackson preached here about 20 years ago, she told the story of the man who had climbed to the rooftop to escape the rising flood waters around his house. A rower in a row boat came along to offer an escape, but the man declined to take such a risk in a row boat. A family with a yacht came motoring by and offered to rescue him, but the man on the roof thought that looked too risky too. Then a helicopter flew overhead, offered to drop a rope ladder down. That, also, he declined. The waters rose and the man perished and went up to the pearly gates. He asked why God had not heard his prayers! And God said, "What are you talking about? I sent you a row boat, a yacht, and a helicopter! What more do you want?"

I thought about that story this week as I thought about churches that are dying or struggling to keep their doors open, churches about to drown for lack of vitality. I have come to believe that God keeps sending spiritually-gifted people into our midst; God keeps inviting us to take advantage of their gifts, to take a bit of a risk, opening ourselves to what they bring, to maybe do something new, something that's never been done before; but like that man on the roof, so many churches tend to not discern or value the new gifts that are staring them in the face.

One of the people who has been attending our church for the past few years lives in East Hampton. He is challenged by a chronic illness. He walks with a cane. He is an artist of sorts, a musician.

He has discovered a way to achieve inner balance, a balance that lets him see the Holy on the inside as well as the outside. To find this balance on the inside, he works on the outside, balancing huge, angular rocks, one on top of the other, several feet high. His sculptures equal the genius of Auguste Rodin.

This form of art requires the kind of patience that the Apostle Paul spoke of in the next chapter of his Letter to the Corinthians, chapter thirteen, where he says, "Love is patient." This man from East Hampton, Andy Weatherwax, has opened up the meaning of patience. He understands something about spiritual balance. He has been sent here by God with a spiritual gift we have never encountered before. I can't wait for spring to come. He says he'll teach me the art of inner balance.

Everyone matters. That is what is revealed so clearly in I Corinthians 12. I share this truth with you now in the greatest of hope. Amen.