

It Is God Who Activates

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

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Everybody has a belly button. It is, of course, a reminder that we were once connected to our mothers inside the womb. It is a visible sign of that nine-month, pre-natal life. There is another button we all have; it is an invisible button that God pushes to activate our spiritual gifts. We are all born with spiritual gifts, but they lie dormant, asleep, until God pushes our button, not our belly button, but that other button that awakens within us an awareness of the very special gifts God has planted in our hearts. Everybody has at least one of these special gifts. Sometimes, God pushes our button when we are children and we know from an early age what our special gift is. Sometimes, God waits until we are teenagers or in our forties or even in our eighties! But once God has pushed our button, we are then compelled to use that spiritual gift for the good of the whole community. We can't hoard it or use it only for our own benefit. The gifts God awakens within us are to be shared.

A few months ago, Aaron DeMaio played his baritone horn in church. When the service ended, I thanked him for sharing his special gift with the church. And Aaron replied, "Any time!" You see, he understands that God has pushed his button, awakened in him a spiritual gift for music. And it doesn't occur to him only to play his horn in his bedroom. He generously shares his gift so that many are blessed and awed by music.

When the Apostle Paul wrote his Letter to the Corinthians, he had a deep concern for the common good. He saw that we all benefit from a caring community, and that a community becomes a caring community when everyone shares their gifts and when everyone's gifts are valued.

Paul had heard via the grapevine that some people were being stingy with their spiritual gifts, not letting anyone else benefit from them. He had heard that some people's spiritual gifts were not being valued. So he wrote them this rather pointed letter to change the quality of their common life.

We can imagine there was one girl in that Corinthian church who could sing Silent Night and another who could sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and other children who could sing spiritual songs, and when they shared these songs in their church, everyone knew that God had pushed their buttons. Everyone knew what God had planted in their young hearts!

There was in Corinth a certain healer who really knew how to listen to what a troubled person was saying. Sometimes, this person would sit outside under an olive tree, and people with troubles and conflicts and sadness could come and unburden themselves, verbalizing their emotional pain. And this person under the tree just listened to every word and to every feeling. After an hour, the visitor felt lighter, more optimistic, even healed! If the healer had stayed home watching television, not sharing the special gift for listening, no one would have been blessed. The common good would have suffered. The Apostle Paul hopes that those who have this special gift for listening will make themselves available, because there are many today who need a listening ear.

In that regard, I am hoping and praying that South Church will renew its long-term covenant with Inter-Community Mental Health this year. Do you know that Inter-Community Mental Health began right here at South Church thirty-five years ago? Three families were suffering gravely: Lois and Roger Richards, Bunny and George Clyde, Willie and Ernie Lewis. They needed someone to listen to their broken hearts. That is when God pushed Rev. Mike Steven's button and his spiritual gift for listening woke up! Since that time, thousands of families dealing with depression and bipolar disorders and anxiety and other mental illnesses have found their way to Inter-Community, now on Main Street in East Hartford. They are serving the common good. They are gifted listeners. Surely, there are ways we can be their partners in ministry and mission in 2013.

I am so glad we have a Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. He is one of the people who always acted with the common good in mind. God pushed his button non-stop! Dr. King knew that no one is free until everyone is free; that no one lives in peace until everyone has access to peace; that civil rights denied to any one group of citizens leaves the whole nation crippled. Throughout this weekend, on the radio, on television, in locations around Glastonbury, we will have dozens of chances to honor Dr. King's commitment to using our spiritual gifts for the common good. God pushed his button and awakened his passion for freedom! I thank God that Dr. King did not keep that passion for freedom to himself or to his own household, but shared it magnificently with the whole nation, the whole world!

But I just want to make the point that one need not be a national hero or a superstar or a movie star or famous in any way to be faithful to the Bible's teaching. God pushes everyone's button.

Right in this church, it happens all the time. God pushed Rich Kragle's button, and we have an animal ministry.

God pushed Pam Reale's button, and we have a mission presence in the Dominican Republic with Arm2Arm. God pushed Liz Smith's button and we have the Joyful Noise Band! God pushed Steve Zwerling's button and we are settling a Congolese refugee family. God pushed my button, and we have a Thursday lunch in each of Hartford's nineteen neighborhoods! God pushed Kelly Miller's button and the Audubon Center has a Peace Pole. God pushed Bob Henderson's and Bob Drury's buttons and we have a white cross on our front lawn bearing witness to our soldiers who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is God who keeps on pushing our buttons, keeps on activating the spiritual gifts that lie asleep within us, just waiting to be summoned into action for the common good. If you've never thought of God as a button-pusher, now you have a new image! And I share this image with you all...in the greatest of hope!
Amen.