Many Gifts, All Beloved
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Genesis 1:26-31 I Corinthians 12:4-13

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Many of you heard me say this on Horton Center Sunday last month, but I have never been the typical summer camp person. I didn't like it when I was a kid because I was the awkward one, sitting by myself while everyone else laughed and sang songs that they all knew the words to. And as an adult, I don't have the full-bodied, confident energy of a quintessential camp counselor. But when someone who I respect and trust asked me to help lead a summer camp session this year I, somehow, said yes. The day before camp started, all of us volunteers were playing getting-to-know-you games and planning out the week. During one of our activities we were each asked to name one unique gift that we were bringing as camp leaders. One volunteer was bringing their fun, goofy attitude. Another was bringing a mental library of camp games and activities. Another was bringing years of experience from various camp settings. What in the world would I say when it was my turn to share? I felt like I was the lone awkward kid again, surrounded by others who were more confident and competent than I was.

We're not always comfortable talking about our unique gifts. Sometimes that's because we've been told not to be boastful. Sometimes it's because we don't know what our unique gifts are, or if we even have any gifts to offer in the first place. That's when it's important to remember that when God created us, God called us good. That goes for each and every one of us. We are made and being made in God's image with the ability to discern and create and love. In our Genesis story, God does not stop after creating and blessing humankind. God calls us to have dominion over the Earth, all of which has also been blessed and called good. Now, dominion is not the same as domination. Dominion is more like the area under a certain king's protection, and it's important to know that Israel's kings who were ruling when Genesis was written, were called by God to rule like shepherds. God calls us to shepherd the Earth, to steward all the good therein. That goes for the gifts of the Earth and it goes for the gifts of the Spirit, those unique gifts that God bestows upon us are ours to steward, to use, not for ourselves, but for celebrating God's goodness and spreading God's love. And the fact that not everyone has the same gifts is not a bug; it's a feature.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he's responding to some unrest having to do with some members lording their gifts over other members. It seems that in the church in Corinth, those who can speak in tongues believe - conveniently - that speaking in tongues is the most important gift. And those who do not have the gift of speaking in tongues may have felt that their gifts were not as valuable, or maybe they thought they didn't have any gifts at all. We still deal with that today. Some gifts and traits are valued more than others by our society and culture. In general, extrovertness is valued over introvertness, production is valued over contemplation, physical and mental ability is valued over physical and mental disability. It seems that as soon as we humans notice differences, we rank them. We struggle so much with the concept of

“different and equal.” And in a society that so highly values individualism, we may struggle even more with the concept of “many parts of one body.”

So Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is still just as important today as it was when he wrote it. Paul writes that there are a variety of gifts, but one Spirit. And all of our gifts, services, and activities that we have to use for the common good are activated by one God. Paul lists some of the gifts of the Spirit that he feels are important and that maybe weren’t getting the respect they deserved at the church in Corinth. He lifts up the gift of wisdom and the gift of knowledge. (The fact that those are two different things may invite us to reconsider how we evaluate intelligence both in others and ourselves.) Paul lifts up the gift of faith. I consider how powerful it is to witness someone who truly believes in a better world continue to work for the common good in dark times. Paul lifts up the gift of healing. Paul lifts up those who can pull off miracles, those who proclaim and prophesy, and those with the gift of discernment. Lastly, Paul affirms those who need the least affirmation in this setting: those who can speak in tongues. But he adds those with the gift of interpreting tongues, because you can speak the most amazing things in tongues, but it means nothing if there’s no one to interpret it. I think of what a gift it is to have a mind that can comprehend quantum physics and how useless it is if it’s not paired with someone who has the gift of translating that for us lay folk. So I wonder if you know that feeling of not having your gifts valued, of not even knowing if you have any valuable gifts. Or of not knowing how to celebrate your gifts without seeming like you’re boasting.

At the summer camp volunteer orientation, it was my turn to share what gift I was bringing to camp that week. I thought about my past experiences and current self and I knew what to say. I said, “I’m here for those kids who find the main lodge overwhelming when everyone is there at mealtime. I’m here for the kids who don’t know what to do during free time because it doesn’t come naturally for them to join in a game with other kids.” And I was. I sat on the sidelines and chatted with campers about books. I hung back on the trail with the stragglers on hike day. What I had struggled with in my own adolescence, what I considered a deficit as an adult, turned out to be the unique gift that I had to offer to God’s children. Am I the only one with that gift? No. Is my gift perfect? No. But did it show God’s love and serve the common good in that time and place? Absolutely. And I like to think that if I can acknowledge and celebrate that unlikely gift in myself, maybe it will help someone else see and celebrate unlikely gifts in themselves. It’s not hubris or arrogance. It’s celebrating God’s goodness.

If sin is anything that separates us from God, surely we partake in sin when we devalue or hurt God’s children. Our greatest commandment, after all, is to love our neighbors as ourselves. But that means nothing if we don’t love ourselves. If we don’t acknowledge God’s blessing and agree that we are good just as God created us. As children of God, are we not partaking in sin when we devalue ourselves? If we celebrate and value our own gifts, might it inspire others to celebrate and value their own gifts? Might we then all celebrate each other’s gifts together? Imagine the joy and affirmation in that celebration. Imagine all the unlikely gifts that may be discovered, the dormant gifts that may be activated by sharing God’s love. Learning something new about your neighbor and maybe learning something new about yourself. And if you’re thinking, “That sounds great!” then come to the homecoming potluck this Saturday, because that’s what we have planned. And we want to know what that gift is that you have, the

one that makes you feel good when you offer to serve it for the common good. Maybe it's a talent of a musical, artistic, or culinary nature. Maybe it's a trait like being a good listener, a dependable friend, or a positive presence.

"But how," you might ask, "do we know when a gift is for the common good and not just for ourselves?" Well, Paul addresses that in the next chapter of his letter. He writes that there is one gift that is given to all of us and that is above all others. And all of our other gifts are meaningless without it. And that gift above all others is love. Love of God, love of ourselves as children of God, love of our neighbors, human and animal alike as God's children, and love of all the Earth as God's good, blessed creation. Beloveds, my hope for you this week is that you seriously reflect on the gifts that God has given you for the common good. That you consider the possibility that you have gifts that may not have been discovered or activated yet. That you know that God took you, blessed you, called you good, and sent you into this world to spread God's love in your unique, authentic way. Amen.