

**Matthew 5:13-16 & Luke 8:19-21**

**1 Corinthians 12:1-11**

**January 17, 2016**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **FEELING GOD'S PRESENTS**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

In light of the Star Wars mania over the holidays, here's a good bad joke I heard at Christmas:

How did Luke Skywalker know what Darth Vader got him for Christmas?

He felt his presence!

What did you get for Christmas? Maybe someone has asked you that question in the past couple of weeks, or maybe you've asked someone else.

I remember as a kid calling my friends and asking, "What did you get for Christmas?" We would compare gift lists and we would go to each other's houses to play with new toys.

Did you get what you wanted for Christmas? Maybe someone has asked you that question in the past couple of weeks. I've noticed how many people have said to me during the past couple of weeks that what they liked most about Christmas was having family home for the holidays. That's a good gift.

Let me ask you some other questions: Did you get anything for Christmas that you didn't expect? That you didn't even know you wanted? That you didn't even know you had a use for? Have you used it yet?

My mother-in-law had a knack for giving me gifts I didn't even know I wanted or needed, but they always came in handy. Back in the early 1980's, she gave me one of those trouble lights with the long retractable cord. I remember opening the gift and thinking, "Oh, a trouble light! I wonder why she gave me that." Well, as it turns out, I'm still using that trouble light thirty plus years later. It's keeping our well pump thermostat warm during these cold days.

Can you handle one more question? Have you written your thank you notes yet? When I was a kid, the rule was thank you notes had to be written by New Year's Day (or at least definitely before we went back to school after Christmas holidays). I have to admit, I didn't meet the New Year's deadline this year, but I did get my thank you notes written.

Sometimes it's hard to write a thank you note when you're not real sure what the gift is. Nancy and I received a wedding gift that we weren't real sure about — so we decided to use it as a spoon rest on the back of the stovetop. Fortunately we knew the givers well enough to admit we didn't really know what the gift was for, so we told them how we had used it. The givers just laughed and said that was fine — it was a nice piece of pottery they thought was pretty.

Continuing in that vein, let me ask you this: What gifts has God given you? Are they gifts you didn't even know you needed or wanted? Have you figured out what to do with your gifts? And, have you said "Thank you" to God for your gifts?

Writing about these verses from 1 Corinthians 12, one professor has said, "A direction for preaching might focus more on what gifts given out of God's abundant and amazing grace can mean. In the wake of the season of receiving that is focused on ourselves, 'What did you get for Christmas?', this text calls us to an awareness of what it means to receive for the sake of others, to accept the gifts God has so graciously given us with a 'thank you' whereby the fullest expression of gratitude is worked out in the community of the faithful."<sup>1</sup>

Listen again to the list of gifts: the utterance of wisdom; the utterance of knowledge; faith; healing; the working of miracles; prophecy; the discernment of spirits; various kinds of tongues; the interpretation of tongues. In Romans 12, Paul expands the gift list: prophecy; ministry; teaching; exhortation; generous giving; diligent leadership; cheerful compassion.

Do you have one or more of those spiritual gifts? If you didn't recognize any of them as fitting you, don't despair. Paul's gift lists aren't exhaustive or exclusive. He is simply giving examples of the amazing gifts God gives us in the church to do what God wants and calls us to do. In the remaining verses of 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the image of the human body, with all of its different parts and members, to illustrate how God's gifts work in the church. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' that would not make it any less part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?" (1 Corinthians 12:15-17)

Paul had some questions of his own for the Corinthian Christians: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" (1 Corinthians 12:29-30) Considering how he just got through talking about how our human bodies are made up of many different parts, none of which has the same function, you can pretty easily figure out that the answer to Paul's rhetorical questions are "No."

Think about our church. Are all preachers? Are all elders? Are all Sunday School teachers? Are all Prayer Shawl knitters? Are all choir members? Are all musicians? Are all administrators? Are all youth group leaders? Are all LOGOS table parents? And the list goes on and on . . . and the answer is, of course, "No." And we can be thankful that the answer is "No." In our church, "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." (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

When a Presbyterian minister wants to be considered for a call to a church, he or she fills out what is called a Personal Information Form or PIF. A PIF is an extended resume. It includes basic information about education and prior service, and also answers to theological questions. One section of the PIF is called "Leadership Competencies." I have filled out a couple of PIF's over the years, and I have read numerous PIF's of other ministers. In light of Paul's talk about spiritual gifts being distributed among the members of the church "just as the Spirit chooses," this section of the PIF has always struck me as kind of unrealistic. The instructions say, "Select 10 leadership competencies from the list below that best describe your leadership traits, gifts and training." The minister is given thirty-three "competencies" from which to choose in these four areas: Theological/Spiritual Interpreter; Communication; Organizational Leadership; and Interpersonal Engagement. I've often wondered how a Pastor Nominating Committee would react if a minister honestly answered, "I believe the Spirit has given me the following spiritual gifts for leadership in the church" and then listed just one or two spiritual gifts, such as preaching and compassion. Would his or her PIF get a second reading? Would he or she get an interview with the PNC? I'm not being cynical. I'm just thinking about Paul's insistence that there are varieties of gifts, services, and activities, and that God, through his Holy Spirit, allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Yesterday your session spent five hours here at the church on our annual session retreat. We sang, we prayed, we talked about God's Word, we discussed what it means to be spiritual leaders as ruling and teaching elders in the church, we enjoyed being together. We spent most of our time working on what we're calling a "missional" budget.

Last Sunday those of you who were in worship were asked to write down your answers to these questions: What does Wallace Presbyterian Church do that means the most to you? and What does Wallace Presbyterian Church do that changes the lives of people? We looked at your answers and used them to identify our priorities as the people of God in this community of faith. Then we spent time apportioning the financial resources we have identified in the 2016 line item budget. This is our attempt to interpret for you the mission and ministry of our congregation and what that mission requires of each and every one of us.

Obviously, since we're talking about budgets, that means we're all called on to contribute financial resources to support the ministry of this church. However, those dollars are merely tools to help make ministry happen through the interpersonal relationships among our congregation's members and people in the community.

At our session meeting on Tuesday night, we will be looking at the responsibilities of our Ministry Teams and their work in the coming year. A while back we changed from talking about "committees" to "Ministry Teams." The session hopes this is more than just a change of titles, but rather a change in our way of thinking here at WPC. Just as our human bodies need all of the different parts and members to contribute and function in a healthy way, so our church needs all of our members to contribute their God-given gifts for the health and mission of our congregation.

A minister colleague wrote an article about Paul's talk about "spiritual gifts" in which he points out that the word Paul uses for those gifts, *charismata*, is related to God's divine grace or *charis*. He also points out that that word for spiritual gifts, *charismata*, is where we get our word "charismatic." That's a word that makes lots of folks nervous and uncomfortable in the church. But listen to what Gary says about these spiritual gifts which God gives to the charismatic church: "First, a charismatic church recognizes that the gifts of God's Spirit are given to every Christian, not just to a fortunate few. Secondly, charismatic Christianity accepts spiritual gifts for practical use and ministry, not simply for display. Finally, the truly charismatic church knows that Christian unity is not a personal achievement but a remarkable gift from God . . . The church exists to glorify Jesus as its Lord, to live by God's life-giving Spirit, and to invite all Christians to express their gifts in the way in which they were intended — for the common good."<sup>2</sup>

Years ago, as I was trying to make a decision about the direction of my pastoral vocation, a trusted friend asked me if I had a book of Frederick Buechner's writings. If so, she said, read such and such a devotion, think about it, and let me know your decision. I found Buechner's devotion and this sentence jumped out at me: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." That helped me make my decision.

The world has deep hungers. You have God-given spiritual gifts you are called to use as your way of saying "Thank you." Where in the mission and ministry of the Wallace Presbyterian Church does your gladness in using those gifts and the world's deep hunger meet? Where do you feel God's presents?

***Let us pray: Almighty God, we give you thanks for your grace toward us in Jesus Christ, who lived, died, and rose again, through whom we have life, hope, and purpose. We thank you for the gifts of serviced that you have given to all your people by your Holy Spirit, so that we may serve you and others. May we all be more aware of the gifts you have given to each of us. Empower the witness and service of us all; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Karoline Lewis, "Commentary on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11," at [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org).

<sup>2</sup>Gary W. Charles, "1 Corinthians 12:1-13, in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, January 1990, 44/1, p. 68.