

You Have Already Won!

January 17, 2016

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

We have all observed the recent Powerball frenzy. Vendors have been overwhelmed by anxious buyers. Local papers carry the banner headline, "How to Increase Your Powerball Odds." Every conversation turns at some point to the sheer size of the prize and speculation about how *I* would spend it if *I* won it.

This has been a festival of unbridled greed. But I also know that many, many potential winners would use a large portion of the winnings to benefit the needy. Cynics might not believe it, but I am sure that many potential winners are quite sincere about this.

We know that when we receive gifts, we are really made to use them, in Paul's words, "for the common good."

When it comes to the Powerball lottery, the promise is that you *might* be a winner. But when it comes to spiritual gifts, the promise is different.

You have already won!

"To each is given," Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians, *"the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."* Let's take that apart and examine the pieces.

"To each is given:" *all* baptized believers are talented and gifted. There are no exceptions. If you say, "I really have no talents," then you are guilty of flawed theology. The Holy Spirit pours out gifts on every member of God's family in Jesus.

On the other hand, what we receive are *gifts*, not accomplishments. I like to think of myself as an instrument rather than as a player. Think about one of the instruments played by our band members. If there is no air moving through that sax or trombone, then what you have is an odd collection of scrap metal. But when the air moves and the instrument is in the hands of a skilled musician, the result is beautiful. We get to experience that here at Emanuel at least twice a month!

So it is with us. This is a particularly good illustration because another word for "spirit" is breath. God breathes the Holy Spirit of Jesus through you and me. And if we allow it, the result is beautiful. You are I are God's instruments. What we do is God's music. It's a gift we get to enjoy.

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"The manifestation of the Spirit:" when the Spirit works through you or me, this is an expression of the Holy Spirit's presence and power. So when we use our gifts, we are living and breathing testimony to God's work in the world. There's a reason why the ELCA's best motto is "God's Work, Our Hands." It is true that when we serve we are doing God's work. It is truer that when we serve in love we can be confident that God is working through us for Jesus' sake.

If we deny our gifts, or if we allow someone else to tamp down our gifts, then the Holy Spirit is less visible. I have been thinking this week about my former intern, Ben Larson. Ben was killed six year ago this week in the earthquake that devastated Haiti. He was a remarkable person and was going to be one of the best pastors the ELCA has seen in a while.

Ben was also a marvelous musician. He had a beautiful voice. He was a masterful guitarist and pianist. He could play any instrument that his hands could touch. But someone told him that when he went to seminary, he needed to leave his musical gifts in the closet. The fear was that his music might overshadow his other pastoral work somehow.

What a foolish idea! As his internship supervisor I was having none of it. So Ben released his gifts for us in worship, in youth activities, and in concerts. He used his gifts for the good of the body of Christ. And the work of the Holy Spirit through him was obvious.

How does the Holy Spirit want to be visible in your gifts? Are there ways that you can let the Spirit work through you more?

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You may wonder what your spiritual gifts really are. That's a fine question. We are going to spend the rest of Epiphany exploring those gifts. One of the places to begin exploring is simply by identifying where your passions and interests lie. So today I'm giving you a little inventory to help with that exploration. This can be just for your reflection. Or you can feel free to write down responses and share them with me or with someone else.

The inventory reminds us that our gifts are often interests and talents that have been with us since childhood. Another clue to our gifts resides in our daydreams and our desires for the future. Yet another clue to our gifts can be found in our growing edges. Where in your life are you being challenged to develop a skill or a talent? Where in your life are you being asked to stretch, to grow, to move beyond your comfort zone? The Holy Spirit may be calling you to uncover and express spiritual gifts you didn't even know you had.

So use this inventory to do some prayerful thinking about your gifts and how they should be used.

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"For the common good:" the one thing we know for sure is that our gifts are not given for our private pleasure. We are not gifted merely for our own benefit. Jesus expects to make the world better through us. The word Paul uses here has several meanings. It can mean for the purpose of bearing up together. It can mean for the purpose of mutual benefit. It can mean for the sake of greater unity. If you want to know that you are exercising your spiritual gifts appropriately, ask yourself a simple question. Am I helping to build up the body of Christ here? If the answer is yes, then you're on the right track.

That thought takes us into next week's message. We're going to talk about our congregation as a community of gifts and a gifted community. But we'll save that for now.

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." You are one of the "each"! Your spiritual gifts make Emanuel Lutheran Church more of what Jesus intends us to be together.

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Let's pray...

Pastor Lowell Hennigs

Emanuel Lutheran Church, Council Bluffs, IA