

It is so lovely to see all of you!

Paul, whose letter to Corinth we read today, would often open his letters with a moment of thanksgiving. It is more than a greeting. It is a prayer. To send love and give thanks to the Lord for the people to whom he is writing. I do the same at the moment to you. For it is lovely lovely lovely to be in your presence.

I have been the church school director here at King's Chapel since this October, and I have greatly enjoyed getting to know your community from that angle. You are kind and generous and possess many gifts. The Church School meets during this Morning Prayer time, so this is my first Sunday away from them.

Thankfully, we have left them in wonderful hands. Right now the children are working with the artist, teacher and community member Emanuel Genovese to create a mosaic offertory plate to use in their family service.

Right at this moment, just down the street, a child is holding a small piece of cut glass in his or her hand, placing it down with a dab of glue, adding his or her bit of color to the art, building towards a more perfect whole. The mosaic would not look complete if each child did not share his or her piece. Of course, we have made sure that they have all the pieces they need to complete their mosaic.

Their pieces of colored glass are akin to the spiritual gifts Paul speaks of in his letter to Corinth. They have all they needs! In verse 7 he clearly writes, "You are not lacking any spiritual gifts." Well, thank goodness for that!

A spiritual gift is defined in various ways by Paul, and many different examples are given, such as the gift of knowledge and the gift of wisdom (which are two different things), the gift of leadership, the gift of mercy, among others. The theme which connects all of these spiritual gifts is that they are talents used to build-up, encourage and comfort the church and the world.

As Paul does not provide a set list of spiritual gifts, I believe the list to be infinite, as long as the gifts are utilized to build-up, encourage and comfort the world. The gift may be music, listening, advocacy, generosity, humor, visioning or details. All of these gifts are necessary and all of these gifts are present in this beloved

community, among countless more. And it is important to note that you do not need to be the best in the world with your gift, but you know it is your gift because you feel at home with God when you are sharing in this way. What do you think your gift might be?

Paul is setting the stage in his thanksgiving portion we read today, reminding everyone of their gifts in the community. He is reminding Corinth that the community, not a single individual, has all the gifts it needs.

He reveals in verses 10 and 11 his reason for writing. He writes, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters."

Now the truth comes out.

The reason Paul has written to Corinth, an early Christian community he helped found, is because they have been fighting! They have all the spiritual gifts they need, and they are still fighting. In fact, one of the reasons they are fighting is because some people think their spiritual gifts are better than another person's spiritual gifts.

The letters from Paul are thought to be the earliest writings in the New Testament, even earlier than the gospels which tell the story of Jesus. Reading the letters of Paul is like listening in on a conversation which took place almost 2000 years ago, giving insight into the lived, and often messy, reality of the early Christian Church.

Many of his words strike us as modern, as the concerns he speaks to are timeless issues. For example, this example we explore today: the complicated relationship we have with our gifts, both how we process them as individuals and in group settings.

As individuals, it is a balancing act. On one hand, it is very easy to think that our spiritual gifts belong to us, that we deserve them and that our gift is the most

important type of gift. This can then lead to arrogance regarding our gifts. We become like peacocks walking around as if we, not God, created the beautiful feathers. Of course, there is room for hard work and I am a big fan of hard work, but even that capacity for hard work rests on gifts from God.

So we must push to not be arrogant. However, we must caution to not take this call to humility to be a call to hide our gifts away. Sometimes we keep our gifts so hidden, we do not even know what these gifts are!

I have a friend who worked as an arts director for a summer camp for middle school girls. She asked a small group of campers to draw a picture of a gift or talent they have. She soon had a cabin of crying middle schoolers, unable to think of anything they were good at. This is heartbreaking but almost comic because as we all know from a distance that each one of those girls, without question, had gifts that they can give to the world. However, even as adults we can have difficulty claiming our gifts.

The solution to both of these extremes is to remember that these gifts are from God and that we must use them humbly, but we still must use them! Where are you on the spectrum?

So, I invite you to reflect:

What is your gift?

How do you share your gift with the world?

Is this what God is calling you to do?

God, thank you for all of these gifts present with us in this community.

Okay, so that individual work can be difficult, but I must warn you, we are about to enter into the really tricky part about celebrating our gifts – being in community with our gifts.

Even if we were living completely righteously, in a humble manner, we are still going to bump heads because people with different gifts have different needs. And people with different gifts are going to value different elements of their

relationship with God and the world, because that is how God intended us to be. The person with the gift of leadership may differ greatly with the person with the gift of mercy. With each gift, we are able to hold a piece of the puzzle, but since we cannot possess all the gifts, we must rely on one another to build together.

This is difficult. We are much more likely to become frustrated with one another. We see the needs that emerge from the gifts as shortcomings in other people, because we do not have that need. Being in community requires patience because of, not despite, the great gifts God has bestowed on the community. It would be very easy to be in community with people who all had the exact same gifts, however that is not the community God is calling for.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer, the famous anti-Nazi theologian, dove into the idea of community in his famous book, "Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community." He wrote:

"God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control, but in order that I might find above him the Creator. Now the other person, in the freedom with which he was created, becomes the occasion of joy, whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction. God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me, that is, in my own image; rather in his very freedom from me God made this person in His image. I can never know beforehand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation. To me the sight may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every man in the likeness of His Son, the Crucified. After all, even that image certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it."

So, we should value the gifts of others, even when they appear strange, even when they create needs we do not understand.

I have always struggled with how to practically implement these sort of teachings into my life beyond the bumper sticker notion. Of course, love our brother and sisters, but how? Of course, appreciate another person's gifts, but how?

Then I heard about the 75% rule of Rev. James Forbes. Rev. Forbes is the pastor emeritus of Riverside Church in New York City, where William Sloane Coffin served for 10 years, Jackie Robinson had his funeral and Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke. Rev. Forbes served successfully for almost 20 years, and he had a guiding rule about community. And, warning, it is a tough one to follow. The 75% rule says that in a healthy church, we are only happy with about 75% of what is going on at any given time—because we are giving up 25% for the person down the pew who has different gifts than us.

Now, I go to Harvard Divinity School. A 75% on anything makes me break out in hives. Yet the rule makes sense. It invites an opportunity for more gifts to shine and for our own capacity to appreciate and experience different gifts to grow. It is a spiritual practice to allow space for the gifts of others to shine.

In the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, “We must live together as brothers or perish together as fools.”

Let us heed his words.

Let us live into the model provided by Paul.

Let us celebrate the gifts God has given us.

And let us give space for the gifts of others to emerge.

And, together, with the grace of God, let us strive to be a beloved community who build-up, encourage and comfort the world.