

Riverside United Church
May 4, 2025

Scripture Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12: 4-11

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“Ministry Signposts: #1 - A Variety of Gifts”

One of the joys of my week has been the opportunity to spend some time with one of my professors from Queen’s Theological College days. As I prepare to retire, it’s been good to think back 39 years to my graduation from Queen’s, and more particularly the three years of learning there. I have kept in touch with John over the years and give thanks that today is his 96th birthday. I give thanks that each time our paths cross, we engage in reflection that helps me to interpret the challenges and delights of ministry and to receive renewed energy to be reminded of purpose and wisdom for the journey of ministry.

I have been wondering for a while about what to do with these last few sermons here at Riverside, because it’s now May, and something is happening at the end of May. Do I reminiscence and tell stories about ministry in places you don’t know? Do I ignore the context of the approaching end, and preach on whatever speaks to me from the scripture readings? Or, do I do something that helps us all do some reflection on the walk we have had together, as we prepare for the fork in the road that is not as far in front of us as it once was!

One of the things that I have been reflecting on as I've been thinking about 22 years here, but also 39 years of ministry is what have been the values, the convictions, the principles, the truths that have kept me walking and being in ministry. Some of these truths have been planted within me before my birth as I absorbed them from family. They have been nurtured through growing up in faith communities in congregations and camps. But, it was at theological college where I probably found the ability to articulate them. And through the three pastoral charges in Saskatchewan, I learned the important connections between the theory and the practice.

So, over the next few weeks, I hope to reflect on some of the ministry signposts that have kept me walking on the journey, the things that every once in a while I needed to be reminded *this is what keeps you going*. So, the first one of those that I want to speak about is "A Variety of Gifts". Today, we have heard verses from Scripture from the first letter to the church at Corinth written by the Apostle Paul. And one of the challenges of overhearing someone else's mail 2000 years later is that we don't always know the context that is being addressed. However, as we read the letter to the Corinthians, it isn't hard to pick up that there is conflict in the community. Imagine conflict in human community! There are struggles for power, different visions, different loyalties. So, Paul writes to them with a vision of the church being one body. 1 Corinthians 12 is probably for me the most influential passage of Scripture as I think what it means to be the church.

So we will reflect on it over the next couple of weeks. And it begins with the teaching or the reminder that there are a variety of gifts within the membership of the body of Christ. We are not all the same - thank goodness! We have different gifts - talents, skills, abilities, interests, passions - and together that enriches the community. Those varying abilities and gifts mean that we all contribute to the ministry that we share.

When I was in theological college in the mid 1980's, the church was emphasizing the ministry of the whole people of God. There were still individuals called and designated into the orders of ministry - diaconal or ordained - but the role of the ministers "set apart" was to enable and support the ministry of the whole community. One of the reasons that I have not used titles or dressed in robes has been to embody that understanding that we are all in ministry as part of the body of Christ.

In the reading from 1 Corinthians, there are only a few spiritual gifts named: the working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, healing, wisdom, knowledge - and those can seem a little bit intimidating and make us feel *well we don't have those* - or *maybe want to have those*.

As I was cleaning up my office, I have found one or two things that I forgot that I had or couldn't remember where it might be. One of those was a resource for discerning Spiritual given gifts.

This questionnaire helps to identify a much longer list of spiritual gifts than those named by the Apostle Paul. One category is practical, hands on, behind-the-scenes gifts - such as assisting, creativity, crafting, service, compassion. There are Nurturing, Caring Gifts such as encouragement, hospitality, mentoring. There are Leadership Gifts such as knowledge, leadership, organizing, vision. There are Personal Faith Gifts such as discernment, giving, prayer, justice, faith, sharing faith with others.

What gifts do you offer? And how have those gifts been nurtured, or to use the verb in the scripture passage, how have those gifts been activated? Sometimes those gifts emerge naturally and sometimes it's through the discernment of another that gifts grow and flourish. One of the abilities that I've tried to develop is that sense of discernment to help others to risk being who they are within the body of Christ.

As I think back on my ministry here at Riverside, I think of times when individuals have had an idea, and my major role has been when they've said "could we do this?" I've said yes, go for it, what help do you need?

I remember when someone came to me and said they wanted to find a way to continue support for a project in Jamaica and I said, what can we do to make that happen?

I remember when someone told me about an idea for an Amnesty International Writing Day and 20 some years later it is still happening each year in December.

I remember one Sunday during coffee time when we had four ideas on the walls about outreach projects and interested individuals were invited to go to one of the signs and see who else was interested. I don't even remember what the four things were, but I do know that one of them produced enough interest to form a grandmothers group for the Stephen Lewis Foundation's work with HIV and Aids in Africa, and the Riverside Grannies came to be, raising thousands of dollars and building connections and friendships within the community.

I remember when someone had an idea for a Lenten project which was to form a support group for leukemia patients and their families and that lasted a whole lot longer than one Lenten season.

I remember at a Council meeting, when it was reported that a group had become an Affirming Ministry, and one Council member said, "are we going to do that?"

Together we discerned the needs in the community and it took awhile, and some building of connections and support, but the Brookfield Community Food Cupboard has now been open for a

year and serving over 50 households a week.

Those are a few examples of how the ministry of the congregation has been activated by the idea or gift of one or two or more. There are many other examples of how instincts of compassion, hospitality, wisdom, generosity have come alive in our midst. There are a variety of gifts, but the same purpose, the same God.

I can remember how on numerous occasions - not as many over the past few years - the congregation has stood and responded - “Yes, we are willing!” - to the question, “Are we willing to support this child and this family within a community that worships God, values and cares for one another, and learns and grows together?”

Today, we’ve shared in baptism and answered that question “Yes we are willing.” One of the things that I love about infant baptism is that it is an affirmation that each one of us is a child of God, that each of us has worth and gifts that is part of our holy DNA. We don’t wait for a person to have to prove that worth, we don’t judge whether they’ve met some standards to qualify them for baptism - no, we affirm that they, that we are all children of God, created in the image of God, fashioned to be gifted individuals in the greater collective of the body of Christ.

So as we walk the journey together, as we seek meaning and hope on this sometimes confusing and disturbing road, we are invited to remember the signposts that help us with our direction. One of those signposts for me has been to remember “a variety of gifts” because it is with variety that we are wonderfully made. It’s an important sign to remember because diversity seems to be seen as more of a threat than a truth for some and that can lead to some distressing and disturbing consequences.

One of the spiritual gifts that enriches faith community is song - both the tunes and the lyrics. And before I came to Riverside, I shared in ministry at Heritage, Regina and Heritage had this wonderful legacy of music that a previous minister - Ken Powers had written with the music director, Dianne Taylor Neale. One of those songs is “A New Heart” - and it’s song that has been embedded in my soul and gives me strength to walk the way. It was originally written to welcome home Lorne Crawford who had a heart transplant and was coming back to the congregation. But its meaning has spread much farther and much deeper. It speaks to many as we seek renewed hearts and new hope, and strength to walk the way, as we find the strength and courage to be followers of the way of Christ. Amen.