

## Gifts of the Holy Spirit

Hector Casas to First Parish Church  
June 9, 2019

Scripture: I Corinthians 12:3-12

Today on the Christian church calendar we celebrate Pentecost Sunday; 50 days having elapsed since the observance of Easter. At the first Pentecost the apostles were together as were many other followers from diverse lands. The Holy Spirit descended upon them as a violent rushing wind. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues. This event was the catalyst for the sharing of the gospel to foreign lands and communities. This is a momentous and important event. For many this day is celebrated as the birth of the Christian church.

In today's scripture reading, Paul is writing to the new faith communities in Corinth who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Communities are in conflict, and Paul is compelled to address is spiritual gifts which he sees as essential to their survival. He describes these as gifts bestowed upon believers by the Holy Spirit, and that these gifts are for the common good of the communities of faith. I now invite you to not only think about these gifts in the early church, but to think about how they relate to our contemporary life. I'd like for us to take some of the mystery out of these gifts and claim them for ourselves just as Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth. I see these as the strengths that all of us bring to our community of faith.

There are nine gifts presented by Paul. To explore them all would be the subject of several study sessions, and I believe they are all worthy of personal reflection by each of us as well. In my study of this scripture, I've concluded my personal interpretation of these, and I'd like to share with you three that have had great importance in my personal growth, and even in my survival. The three are healing, languages, and discernment of spirits. As you read the nine gifts, I encourage each of you to look back on your life experiences and reflect on which of these have been important for you. As for me, I believe these are as critical in our faith community, and society at large, today as they were 2000 years ago.

Healing is a gift that we can easily attribute to our medical professionals who undergo concentrated academic and clinical training programs. Most are committed to a life of helping humanity live in healthy and functional bodies and minds to the fullest extent possible. I'd offer that we who are not medical professionals are also important partners in healing. I believe our mental and emotional well-being is as important as our physiological health. We cannot underestimate the value of our participation in visitation programs, recovery programs, support groups for those who are grieving, and survivor groups.

Allow me to share a personal experience with healing during the AIDS crises of the 1980's and 90's. My first partner's devastating death in 1986 and my concurrent infection were the most devastating events I had ever faced in my

life. I had seen my partner suffer for 15 months with a debilitating illness that progressed from one mysterious infection to another. Without any medical protocol or intervention available, I sought psychiatric help in order to preserve my sanity. Just as my life seemed to be coming together in a healthy relationship, I was forced to face what was widely assumed to be a death sentence from a degenerative disease. In addition to living in an environment and society that was in a panic of fear from this disease, I was reeling from my partner's loss and my own prognosis simultaneously.

Praying for God to show me the way through these most desperate months, my spirit found grace and hope 2 years later when I participated in a 12-step group that was announced at my church for newly diagnosed persons. The program followed steps similar to the AA program, and all of us in that first group found it to be a God send in reducing despair and replacing it with hope.

The 12-week program concluded but the group unanimously insisted on continuing to meet twice monthly for mutual support as a church cell group. We did so for five years afterwards. We became a family by caring for and supporting each other. Our numbers began dwindling soon afterward, but through God's grace our strength and hope held strong during those years when there were no effective drug therapies. You see, for many of these individuals we were now the only family that they could count on for support. I count this experience as the greatest healing I've had and by the grace of God I was blessed to be their cell leader as we all dealt with our

health issues and impending mortality and losses. I thank my parent's guidance and early childhood church training that prepared me for this mission with my peers. I learned what others have written about. When dealing with a difficult situation in life, the most effective therapy for one's self is to get out and help others who are suffering. This shifts the focus from dwelling on one's personal problems. By the grace of God, some of us survived and remained healthy until effective drug therapies were available to live with the disease as a manageable chronic health condition.

The importance of living in a multi-language society has also been a formative factor in my life. Until I began school at 6 our life was lived in Spanish. Visits with neighborhood friends, grandparents, cousins, and in our social life were all in Spanish in the 50's in south Texas, just as they had for many of our ancestors since before the southwest border moved south.

I had just turned 6 when my mom walked with me the 5 blocks to the nearest community school. After the usual personal information provided by my mom, the teacher directed my attention to a slot board with number, color, and object cards inserted. The teacher pointed to several random cards, and I was expected to respond with the appropriate English word. Well, I failed, and I was extremely disappointed. On the way home I told my mom that it wasn't fair because I knew all the objects in Spanish. Even worse was my anger at being assigned to a classroom labeled "low first". In her usual manner, she told me that if I didn't like the result, it was up to me to prove otherwise.

Two months passed and in late October it was time for another point and respond test session. This time I passed. I had overcome the first major academic challenge in my young life. The best outcome came about as a result of moving to Mrs. Wiggins “high first” class. I, like many others, will always remember Mrs. Wiggins, the first grade teacher who rescued me and encouraged my enthusiasm for learning. She held a position of honor in my family since she also taught my younger sister and brother and also inspired them to do well academically. She was an honored guest at many of our family functions including my university graduation dinner. She, just like any of the other teachers in those two grades, spoke no Spanish, but possessed a gift that facilitated her communication with her classes. I believe that for her teaching was a mission of love for children in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city.

Language also played an important role in our family’s faith journey. Like all the Spanish-speaking families in her town, Mom’s young church life consisted of joining friends at the local rural Catholic Church for special religious events. Since she was an intellectually curious person, she could not understand the messages or the purpose of the services. Years later as a young mom, she had a visit from two young Mormon missionary men while she was at home. My infant sister and I were there with her. Although she had a fair command of English, she later shared with us her fascination with the biblical topics that these student missionaries discussed with her in Spanish. We never attended the Mormon Church, but her search for a

spiritual faith that would repair an abusive relationship with my dad had begun. Even as adults, she encouraged us to seek our own spiritual truth in the Bible, and to seek worship in a style and place authentic for us.

Today’s scripture describes nine gifts of the Holy Spirit. Those two young Mormon student missionaries claimed their spiritual gifts, and were committed to their practice and to sharing it with others.

One of the spiritual gifts that I personally value greatly is the “distinguishing of spirits” or “discernment of spirits”. I believe it is incumbent on all who are baptized by the spirit to turn away from and reject the many false teachers and prophets whose motivation lies somewhere other than on Christ’s greatest commandments to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, soul, and might; and to love your neighbor as yourself. Were it not for praying for authentic truth in my spiritual life, I would have succumbed to condemnation. I would not be in this church, or perhaps in any church, today. I was already 28 years old when I gave up on prayers to be normal and came to accept my true self. My prayers had changed to prayers for being shown the way out of my inner struggles. The sermons in church were increasingly about judgment and condemnation, and less about love for those Christ cared about.

One February Sunday morning, the sermon scripture was the clobber scripture about Sodom and Gomorrah. The preacher railed on and on about the homosexual lifestyle which was a favorite target on the national stage in the late 70’s. I thought it

strange that the pastor made no mention of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah insisting that Lot allow them in to sexually assault the male visitors in town. The visitors were messengers sent by God to provide those wicked cities another chance at redemption. He did not mention the inhospitality displayed to these strangers, or that Lot had even offered his own daughters to the raving mad men of the town. Instead the point of his sermon was condemnation of same sex love. I went home very upset and resolved that I would never set foot in that sanctuary again. I determined to claim what I had always believed to be my faith.

It brought me a sense of relief to shed my psyche of condemnation, but also great sadness that such misguided spirits are camouflaged as the Christian church and are often the dominant voice for the church.

Eight years later in April of 1986, I returned home from church on Sunday to find my partner of over 3 years dressed in one of his suits. I was shocked since the disease had already devastated his body. He had lost a third of his body weight and was barely able to walk. I asked why he was dressed and where he was going. He asked that I take him to my church. I told him services were over and we would not find anyone there. I asked why. He responded that he wanted to get baptized. I asked why now, and he responded with the words "I don't want to go to hell." I hugged him and told him that God loved him and he would not condemn him. He insisted it had to be that day. I arranged for a visit that afternoon from our assistant pastor, a woman who I had come to admire

for her pastoral qualities. She had an emotional but very beautiful meeting with both of us, and scheduled his baptism for that evening's service.

My emotions were all over the board that day. I was happy for his decision. Although he had grown up in the Church of Christ he stopped attending once he graduated from the university because he could not accept the messages of being unworthy. He usually attended services with me on Easter, Christmas, and other special musical events at my urging. My anger was at the enduring harm that he suffered at the receiving end of condemnation. That Sunday night was his last night at home. The next day his doctor and I checked him into M.D. Anderson Hospital. It was there that he died 21 days later.

Verses 5 and 6 of today's scripture read thus, "5. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons." I want to emphasize "all persons". There are no gender qualifications, no age qualifications, nor are there any other qualifying criteria. We believers are not promised all the spiritual gifts, but each believer may have strengths in any one or more of these.

Each of us has gifts. As I saw Dr. Jane's musical presentation on Ezekiel's prophecy of bringing life to bones, I believe there is also a metaphor for us that calls us to bring flesh to our church structure and breath life into the church with our own spiritual abilities.