

**CALLED TO USE OUR GIFTS
FOR THE COMMON GOOD**

1 Corinthians 12:1-11
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Paul's letter to the church at Corinth is a long treatise on working together. I don't know why the Corinthian church had so much difficulty working together, but I do know why a football team in the first integrated high school of Alexandria, Virginia did. After all, it was the 1960s, and Alexandria had resisted integration for more than a decade. They already had 4 successful high schools, 2 black and 2 white, each one great in football. And if you're from the south, you know that for school boards, success in football is right up with there with success in academics. But when the surrounding schools started consolidating, Alexandria had to follow suit because they were losing ground against bigger schools with a bigger talent pool. But in 1970, when they were welcoming their first graduating class from their newly integrated huge school, they still couldn't win at football. A change was needed, and they surprised everyone by promoting one of the black football coaches to head coach. Equally amazing, the much more seasoned and popular white coach agreed to be his assistant coach. But these two coaches were focused on one common purpose: to create an Alexandria football team that could outshine all the other Virginia teams. When Bill Yoast writes about the first football camp he coached alongside Herman Boone, he talks about a large group of young men who didn't know each other, had never played alongside team members of a different color, and were fiercely competitive. After all, most of them had assumed they'd be varsity starting players back at their old, smaller high schools. But by the end of that camp, a team had formed that put cooperation so far ahead of competition that they quickly dominated the football season that fall of 1971. In a

racially divided city, this high school football team had managed to overcome those divides to form a cohesive team – because they put their gifts to use for the common good. Their yearning to make it to the state championship was so strong that even their racial fears and prejudice could not divide them. That’s the power that comes when we use our God-given gifts for the profit of all.

It’s this kind of unified purpose that Paul writes about as he teaches the young church in Corinth to work together and use the gifts Spirit has given to them. We are all given unique and beautiful gifts from God. Some in the form of talents, some in the form of blessings, and some in the form of spiritual gifts – gifts the Spirit gives us specifically for our work in the church and our Christian ministry in the world. Of these spiritual gifts, Paul writes these words as guidance not only to the Corinthian church, but to churches of all times in all places. The Spirit gives us gifts and calls us to use those gifts fully and abundantly for the benefit of all. This is how God works through us to create the world God intended. There’s a quote that captured my imagination and started guiding my life when I was in 6th grade:

“What you are is God's gift to you, what you become is your gift to God.” Turns out the quote came from Jesuit theologian Hans Urs van Balthasar. And I thought it was just a cool bumper sticker.

We, just like the Corinthian church, have been given abundant gifts from the Spirit. These gifts are meant to unify and strengthen us as a church and as a human community. But that strength and unity only come when we hear God’s call to use our gifts for the common good, for the profit of all, like that team in Alexandria, Virginia.

This isn't always easy, particularly in a world where competition seems more highly valued than cooperation and collaboration. We, as the church, are called to lift these values of cooperation and collaboration as our normative values, even if it seems countercultural. Public servants and politicians may compete instead of collaborate, because they have elections to win. But winning elections isn't supposed to be their purpose: they are called to serve the public and govern us. Bosses and employees may compete instead of collaborate, because they each want to make more money. But making more money isn't their purpose; they are called to work toward a common purpose of fulfilling their business's goals and strategies, creating its products and serving its customers. The world loses sight of this common purpose, probably because they don't know that each person is gifted by God, given a purpose or a *vocatio*, as we call it here at Community Church. I would argue that each church, business, school, and even each family is given a *vocatio*, a purpose. But that's a philosophical argument for another day. What is crystal clear in scripture is that Christians are given specific gifts from the Spirit and that we are called by God to use these precious gifts for the common good of this community called "the church." Each of our individual gifts is meant to be used for the common good, or as King James translates it, "for the profit of all."

Perhaps worship is the most obvious example of this truth. How useful is it if I just show up to preach on a Sunday morning, but never unlock the doors and invite anyone to hear the sermon? How inspiring is it to you if the choir sings the most glorious anthem to an empty sanctuary? Or worse, what if I never preach that sermon, or they never sing that anthem. Then, we're hiding our gifts.

Paul challenges us to bring our gifts out into the light, to share them with the whole church, and to use them together in unity to strengthen the church.

Later this morning, we're going to welcome several of our newest church members into this family of faith. Each one of these people has covenanted not just to be a member, but also to share their gifts and talents to build up this Body of Christ. Some will give time, some will serve on a committee, some will give money, some will start a new ministry, and some will serve food on Sunday mornings and at church dinners. Next Monday night at our all-church dinner and Annual Meeting, we'll celebrate that they join with another 90 or 100 of you have covenanted to continue as members of this church. One of the beauties of this church's membership plan is that we covenant anew each and every year to become members. No one is a "member for life." Each year, we are invited to reflect on the Spirit's call in our lives and answer as Spirit leads what it means to be part of this community of faith. Each year, we invite the Spirit's call to guide us, asking: "Where are we answering God's call to use our gifts for the common good, for the profit of all?" If we're only using our gifts for our own profit, it rings strangely thin. We'll hear more about that when we read 1 Corinthians 13 next month. But today's scripture encourages us to reflect on the gifts God has given us and how they might be shared with one another, with God, and with God's church for the common good, for the betterment of all.

When churches do this well, they build a little of piece of God's kingdom on this earth. Several years ago, I saw it vividly in action as a church on Fox Island, Washington built a new building together. When B. J. arrived there in 1995 as their pastor, they had been arguing for 30 years over whether to build a new, larger building on the property they purchased in 1960s. When they finally voted to build in 1998, they also voted to use a contractor who allowed and

encouraged volunteer labor from the church members - which would result in a huge financial savings, and require a huge buy-in from the church folks. And buy-in they did. Joe, an experienced plumbing contractor, had been dreaming of this new building for years, hoping to be the on-site contractor for the church. Recently retired, he had the time, the gifts and the skills; but that particular year his shoulder gave out and the surgery and recovery meant he couldn't be on-site the first few months. So, Dean stepped up to take on that role, getting advice from Joe when he needed it, but steadfastly overseeing every work crew to make sure they were fulfilling the church's dreams and plans. Jim was a skilled woodworker, who had crafted the church's communion table and pulpit in the old church and looked forward to offering his artisan skills to the finish work in the new building. But then Dean called and said they would need some backhoe work, knowing Jim had that ability as well. I have the fondest memories of Jim lifting our little preschool son up onto those equipment seats as he drove around the property, helping Michael feel a part of this building his daddy's church was building and also giving a great thrill to a little boy who was in love with trucks and tractors. Several months later, when the huge wooden arches, known as glue lams, arrived damaged, construction of the sanctuary had to come to a screeching halt – until Jim arrived to work with the construction crew to teach them how to repair and strengthen the glue lams. Artisan Jim directed his artistic craftsmanship into construction skills, and saved the project so that construction could continue on schedule. When Plumber Joe was finally back in action after his shoulder healed, it was perfect timing since the plumbing plan was now needed. Joe had a lot of personal preferences about plumbing, and he loudly voiced his opinions. But at the end of the day, when the building committee decided on the plan that was in the best interest of the church, its budget, and its ministry needs, Joe

implemented that plan with his plumbing crew, setting aside his own personal preferences. Meanwhile, the long-dreamed of chancel windows arrived, at twice the expected cost. Which meant there was no window money left for the windows in the lobby, classrooms or offices. An owner of a growing business who barely made it to worship each week knew she had the spiritual gift of giving and the means to do so, so she wrote the check for the remaining windows. The church's gourmet cook, Sally, spent hours working with the kitchen committee to learn about commercial grade kitchens and warming kitchens, developing a budget for the equipment needed, and then working with Trustees to determine which kitchen was in the best interest of the church and then helping them create that kitchen. Sally's family didn't get too many home cooked meals during those months, but the church ended up with a beautiful kitchen, both affordable and functional for the annual salmon bake and the weekly youth gatherings. Nearing the opening day, Dean's wife Char left her watercolor studio to begin working with the decorating committee. A lot of wonderful workers who knew nothing about color schemes or interior design created a lovely interior plan, thanks to Char's artistic eye and her advanced understanding of color and light.

So many individual gifts, so many unique needs, each integrated and merged together to create a beautiful new building. So many beautiful individuals, with so many unique gifts, each cooperating and collaborating to make their 30-year dream into a reality. That building still sits atop a hill on Fox Island with light shining from its sanctuary windows each evening, visible from the Puget Sound waters as people sail past the island, from various roads and byways on the island as people drive to their homes each evening, and across the way to a state prison on McNeil Island. A testament to the truth of Paul's wisdom: Each is given a manifestation of the

Spirit for the common good. Just like that football team in Alexandria, who figured out how to use their gifts work together despite their color differences, that church on Fox Island figured out not only how to work together to decide to build a building, but also to use their gifts to get that building built. Similarly, that football team used their gifts and worked so well together that they made it to the state semi-finals, barely winning in a nail-biting last minute of play. But then they easily swept through the final game to win the state championship, a new Virginia team in 1971 called the Titans, a team you may know from the Hollywood version of their story, *Remember the Titans*.

Football teams are not necessarily called by God to work together, but work together they must for the team to succeed. Churches, however, are most definitely called by God to work together. So, work together we must. More importantly, work together we can. We are privileged to be called and trusted by God to use our gifts for the common good of all. This means no one of us is responsible for everything, but each one of us responsible to all. We're in this together, and Spirit is with us, blessing us with abundant gifts, talents and opportunities and then calling us to use those gifts, talents and opportunities to bless the communities we are a part of. Where has Spirit blessed you, and where is Spirit calling you to bless others?

Let's pray silently and listen as Spirit helps us answer these questions....