

“Different Gifts”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
January 7, 2007
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

How quickly the season changes. It doesn't seem that long ago that we were setting up Christmas trees, and shopping for that perfect gift while whistling “I'm dreaming of a white Christmas.” Now the snow has mostly melted, and the sun has been an infrequent visitor. We took down the Christmas trees in the sanctuary Friday so as to make room for communion and the ordination of new leaders. I found it somewhat sad, but Herb Freier said to me, “there is also something beautiful when everything gets taken down and cleaned up and back to normal.”

How quickly the season changes. I was in Barnes and Noble recently, purchasing a few children's books for a baby shower. I knew what I wanted, quickly found them, and then gasped when I saw the line. Post-Christmas, and still a huge line. And it seemed to be moving slower than usual. And then I realized – now it is the season of gift returns. Part of the reason the line was moving so slowly was that people had to offer excuses for why they were returning their gifts. “I really love this book, but I already have two copies.” Or, “it was really thoughtful, but I asked for the DaVinci Code DVD, not book.” Remember when Oprah had that author on her show who, it turns out, had made up his memoirs? We all heard about that, right? Well, in front of me in line, I heard one customer ask the salesperson if she could return James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* because, she said, “it is not true.”

Now it is an awkward thing, right, returning gifts. Some families do it different ways. Discreetly inserting a gift receipt in with the present, or organizing family return days. Others will continue to say as the years go by, “I never see you wear that sweater we gave you back in 1998.”

Do you ever wish that some gifts had never been given? I sure felt that way as an adolescent. Now I want to broaden our thinking not just about Christmas presents but to gifts of talents and skills. I stressed this during our children's time this morning, because we know that too many kids go from being proud of their special talents, their God-given gifts of intelligence and curiosity and specific skills – to wanting to be cool, to not stand out, to blend in, to return their gifts. In those awkward days of junior high school, how many times we wanted to return the gifts that made us unique. Nothing worse than being unique in those days. If you wanted to be cool, you were expected not to be different, but to act like everyone else and like the same things.

From her work as a psychotherapist, Mary Pipher wrote a groundbreaking book a decade ago called *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. At adolescence, says Mary Pipher, “girls become 'female impersonators' who fit their whole selves into small, crowded spaces.” Many lose spark, interest, and even IQ points as a

“girl-poisoning” society forces a choice between being shunned for staying true to oneself and struggling to stay within a narrow definition of female.¹

There are gender differences in how this plays out, but in our culture both boys and girls can be shunned for staying true to themselves. So in my ministry with children and youth, I place a great deal of emphasis on building up self-confidence. And stressing that the special gifts they have been given are to be treasured as gifts from God. Churches need to combat the negative messages of teen culture that try to make kids think they are not good enough the way they are. And, truth be told, that is not a bad message for us adults to hear as well. You are unique and you are loved.

There are church growth consultants out there who urge church leaders to target particular niche audiences. If you want a church to grow, they advise, well, aim everything you do at a specific type of people. Go for the business people, they say. Or, go for the families with young children and aim everything at their needs and interests. Their advice is based on the underlying belief that people are most comfortable around others who look like them and like the same things. But that is a high school cafeteria, not a church. In this pivotal passage from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church, he insists that the church is not to be a group of like-minded people who look alike, or act alike. And instead argues that the Holy Spirit gifts the church with diverse people.

Reading between the lines, it is clear that there were problems in the church in Corinth. Garry Wills has just written an accessible little book titled *What Paul Meant*. And Wills says,

The main trouble in Corinth seems to have been a form of superspirituality. Like New Age types seeking fashionable preachers, some people became puffed up and “airy,” saying their newest gurus (claiming to represent Apollos, for instance, or Peter) are higher minded than Paul (1 Cor 1.12, 3.22), that their own gifts of prophecy and speaking in tongues bring them closer to the Spirit than more ordinary folk, that they know of a better form of baptism (1 Cor 1.13-17). Paul calls the preachers of such attitudes high-flying [apostles] – literally, the “super-too-much (hyperlian) [apostles]” (2 Cor 11.5, 12.11), and repeatedly says that their followers are “inflated.”²

They thought they did not need each other anymore. They started to rank spiritual gifts, inflating the value of their own gifts and downplaying the gifts of others and thought that they could make it on their gifts alone. They thought that they were better than everybody else. I call it the Corinthian cancer, and it can happen anywhere – a school playground, a church, our country. Believing that we are the superspiritual ones and don’t need anybody else. That anyone who is different or disagrees is stupid or worse and can take a hike. And in response to the Corinthians, Paul insists that varieties of gifts are activated and allotted “just as the Spirit chooses” and that they are “to be used for the common good.”

I want us to think today, on this day that we will ordain and install leaders for this church, about the kind of leadership that is needed in church and in our larger society. We need leaders who recognize that there are varieties of gifts that people offer. Here at Central, we can be a model, perhaps, for other churches and for our community at large. Here at Central, we represent such great diversity: young and old, white and black, gay and straight, recent immigrants and people whose roots in these very pews go back generations. We come with great varieties of gifts – and they are all so needed.

We will be ordaining and installing elders who will help us make wise decisions about our priorities. These elders will try to blend our unique gifts together so that, as a church, we can make a difference in this community. That through focused actions, we can be the church God wants us to be. Our deacons will do their very best to be compassionate and caring. They will try to keep us connected to each other and to the church, those here on Sundays and those not able to be here due to illness or age. Our deacons will try to keep us connected not despite our differences but enjoying our differences.

There will be challenges ahead, of course. The church, from its earliest days, maybe especially in the churches featured in the Bible, has always had its share of difficult decisions. The church has always struggled with how best to use limited time and resources to do God's work.

Here at Central we are trying to do what many said could not be done. After decades of decline, we have had two consecutive years of wonderful growth in people and identity. It turns out people do want to be part of a church that opens its doors and arms wide to all kinds and cultures of people. It turns out people do want to be part of a church that makes a difference in the heart of downtown. It turns out people do want to be moved and inspired by music that is not simplistic featuring three chords, five words, and ten refrains. It turns out people do want to be part of a church that features wonderful, healthy community meals. It turns out that people do want their grandchildren and children to grow up feeling wanted and loved and experiencing diversity.

And so we'll keep on keeping on. We'll keep being the church, blending this wonderful variety of people and gifts together, allotted and activated by the Spirit, to work for the common good. We are in a new season here at Central. There are no lines dedicated to gift returns – it is about celebrating in the variety of gifts found here. If you are looking for a church – we are looking for you. If you are looking for a church to nurture and celebrate your unique gifts there is a place here for you. To God be the glory. Amen.

¹ Mary Pipher, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls (Putnam, 1994). As my copy has been loaned out, this description of her work is from an editorial review posted on Amazon.com

² Garry Wills, What Paul Meant (New York: Viking, 2006) 114-115. Wills translates “apostle” and “apostles” as emissaries, a distinction I could not cover in this sermon.