

May 26th: Work

Last Fall, we returned to the Narrative Lectionary, and each week, we faithfully listened to and meditated on passages with a common theme—Love in Action. We’ve listened for God’s voice as we learned more about what it means to be people of love, and what it looks like for us to put that love into tangible service in our community. Today is the final Sunday in this year-long sermon series—the culmination of our study together. I hope that this series has spoken to you in some way, or prompted you to grow deeper in your faith, and I hope that as we move into a new season, we will hold onto the lessons that we’ve learned and continue to apply them to our daily lives.

As we prepare to conclude our thoughts on this subject, let’s pray together.

God of multitudes, your holy word tells us that you are three in one, operating together for wholeness and redemption. In you, there is diversity and unity, and through this example you show us the way to being a diverse and unified people. We are often quick to name our differences and the characteristics that make us distinct from one another, so offer us a new way of being that allows for these unique gifts while still creating peace and connection with each other. Fill us today with your divine purpose, and equip each of us for the work of ministry. Amen.

Have you ever been part of a group project that goes really, REALLY poorly?

Maybe you were in school and forced to work with other students who slacked off, or were part of team at work where you picked up the majority of the tasks while others did the bare minimum or you planned a family picnic with that one cousin who always forgets to bring the napkins—it probably wasn’t your definition of a good time, right? You probably walked away a little frustrated, or maybe even pretty annoyed, or if you went to my family gathering you walked away with a plate of everyone’s “unique” potato salads.

No matter the exact circumstance, I think we can all agree that working with other human beings can come with plenty of complications and headache. We don't always get along, or have the same ideas, or are willing to put aside our differences for the benefit of a larger goal—we get territorial, or we let others shoulder the burden, or we let petty conflicts get in the way of accomplishing something greater.

Which is why it's so curious that Jesus leaves his movement in the hands of a bunch of men and women—human beings who have walked with him and participated in his ministry, but are a far way off from being divine or perfect themselves.

The text that we've been reading over the past couple of weeks, 1 Corinthians, is a letter to a community in crisis—their church is one big, dysfunctional group project. You've got factions forming within the congregation, you've got people arguing about who should really be in charge, you've got folks concerned about who's gifts are the most important, and you've got a larger culture that is more focused on divisions than it is interested in unity. That's a recipe for failure—right? But our friend the apostle Paul has been writing to them to give them advice—he's the teacher or boss who's trying to find a way for this experimental community to move forward together.

And he doesn't hold back from some necessary critique about their weaknesses or issues—Paul goes through their many different conflicts and tries to show them that this way of following Jesus is not about securing power for ourselves, or making sure we get the best grades, or becoming the employee of the month—it's about working together for the transformation of our world. Sure, we rely on the support of the Holy Spirit to help build the Kingdom of God on earth, but God has given us real work to do in order to teach, preach, minister, heal, and feed our neighbors. God has invited us into this messy group project because it is in this kind of wacky, imperfect community that we can multiply our efforts and expand our impact. We can do certain things alone, but when we work together, our ministry becomes something larger and more successful.

But in order to make this concept of the church possible, Paul is convinced that the Holy Spirit has to be part of the equation. He writes that this kind of community relies on the Spirit to provide inner support and outward cohesion for the early church. Last week we learned about Pentecost, and we heard about how the Spirit not only came down on those first disciples like tongues of fire on their heads, but it also filled their souls with passion and courage. In that passage, the Spirit is both on those disciples, and within them—and so when Paul is talking to the Corinthian church, he tells them that the Spirit must be on them, and within them as well.

At the very beginning of this chapter, Paul says that this presence of the Spirit both on and within the members of this congregation results in a gifting, just like it did on Pentecost. The presence of the Spirit results in gifts that reside in each person within the community. But Paul isn't saying that these gifts are all the same, or given for the same purpose. In verses 4 through 6, Paul writes, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work."

Different kinds of work, but the same God at work.

You might be wondering: why are these gifts distributed in this way? Well in verse 7, Paul says that this distribution of distinct gifts to each person is for the common good—it is good for gifts to be distributed to different people in different ways.

This tells us that the Holy Spirit isn't interested in uniformity, and God is not interested in creating all of us human beings to be exact clones of each other. God isn't in the business of fitting everyone into the same mold. It has always been God's plan that each of us is one of a kind. And this level of uniqueness and specificity allows for each person to be completely themselves while still contributing to the whole. Each member of the spiritual family is important, not because we are all the same, but because our differences reflect God's love

of diversity. God loves diversity, and God has created diversity from the very beginning.

And the good news is that this means that our group project's success doesn't rest on all of us thinking just one way, or operating like robots, or pretending that one kind of skill is better than others. The church's success doesn't require that we be carbon copies of each other. In order for our congregations to be effective, God doesn't require that we all do the same work.

But it does require that we remember that we need each other. Our combined purpose requires that each of us does the part that has been given to us. Our collaborative community requires that each gift and each person is offered the opportunity to share in a way that makes sense for them. Not in ways that drain us or make us weary, but in ways that bring vitality and fulfillment to our souls, and hope and light to our world.

In verses 8 through 10 remind us, Paul gives us an example of what this could look like. He says, "To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues."

And I think if Paul was speaking to our congregation today, in a port city just like Corinth, where our differences of origin and opinion can be quite pronounced, he would give us the same advice. He might say to us that some people are gifted at making wise decisions, and some others are gifted at knowing important information, and others are gifted at trusting in God's plan and reminding us of the goodness that God has promised us. He might tell us that some people are good at bringing hope and healing to dark situations, and others are good at naming forces of evil or injustice in our world, and others are good at speaking in ways that others can hear.

And there might be some newer gifts to add—gifts that have been added because our modern culture is different from the world of the first century. Paul might advise us that some people will be gifted in financial matters, or gifted in social media, or gifted in premarital counseling. He might say that some are good at the drums, some others are good at organizing potlucks, and some others are good at repairing the plumbing.

But he would be quick to remind us that these gifts all come together for the common good—and everyone has something to offer. Each person is uniquely equipped and each person is essential to our group project. If the church is going to continue and be passed down to the next generation, we must all contribute the gifts that we have been given.

As we wrap up our time together, you might be wondering to yourself: what are my spiritual gifts? You might be asking: how do I know what my work is supposed to be?

Some of you might have attended church your whole life, or have been volunteering in some capacity or another throughout the years—but might not have stopped to think about what your unique skill set is, or what talents you have to offer—you've just done what needed to be done, or stepped into a role that needed to be filled. But as you reflect on the kind of tasks that bring you joy, or the kind of roles that suit your unique gifts, you might want to consider that now might be the time to live fully into the work that God has placed on you and within you. Now might be time to pursue that specific ministry or that specific leadership position. Now might be the time to let go of something that isn't in alignment with your greatest gifts. Now might be time to try something new. Now might be the time to pass the baton to someone else. Or now might be the right moment to volunteer for the first time.

If you are open to figuring out more about what your spiritual gifts might be, or are curious how these gifts might be needed in our congregation and larger community—I have two ways that you can move forward today. Two things you can do to think a little deeper about yourself and how you fit into this group

project we call church. So on the screen behind me, you'll see two different QR codes—which you can scan with your smartphone's camera.

First, there's a short quiz you can take to learn more about how God has uniquely gifted you—it should only take you 10-15 minutes to complete. This particular resource was put together by our denomination, but if the language or the questions are not resonating with you, there are plenty of others out there that can fulfill the same purpose. Find one that works for you, and perhaps find some time this week to complete that questionnaire.

And once you've had some time to reflect on your unique gifts, you are invited to consider how you might serve with us at Bremerton UMC, or how you might serve in our larger Bremerton community. The QR code on the screen will take you to a Google Form to fill out, or if you prefer a hard copy, there will be Serve cards at each of the tables during our Volunteer Celebration Luncheon. As you're chatting with friends or meeting someone new, make sure to grab one and take it home with you. Completed cards can be turned in to any staff member—myself, Pastor Heather, or Cheryl in the office, or you can place them in the black mailbox by the door and they will be collected and shared with our team.

I'll leave you with this—

My friends, God made you, exactly as you are, on purpose. And he made you exactly as you are, because there is work out there in the world with your name on it. There is work that is waiting for us, there is work that is waiting for you.

Amen.