

**Gifts & Call – Part I: “Gifted and Called”**  
**Rev’d. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen**  
**The Congregational Church of Hollis**  
**17 January, 2016**  
**Epiphany 3C**  
**1 Corinthians 12:4-11**  
**John 2:1-11**

On the third weekend of January every year, our nation pays special homage to the Rev’d. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and to the principles of human and civil rights he marched, demonstrated, and died for. Those principles are rooted in a fundamental acceptance of the dignity that each and every human being deserves, regardless of the color of their skin, their background, history, political stance, ability, disability, or lifestyle—any characteristic that makes them different from the majority.

He was not the only one who espoused those values, of course. Without the gifts and efforts of countless others who helped to recruit, organize, galvanize, to march and demonstrate with Dr. King, and just as often in his absence, the Civil Rights movement would not have had the impact that it did. And so, while it is appropriate to honor Dr. King, our homage is properly attributed also more broadly to the countless valorous and selfless individuals who have risked, and do risk, their own security and that of their families to effect necessary change in this country.

As anyone who has paid attention to our nation’s news the past few years is aware, we are still a long way from realizing the vision held by many, but given the gift of eloquent articulation by the Rev’d. Dr. King in his speeches and letters. His vision, like that of the Old Testament prophets, was the same vision that God gave flesh-and-blood articulation to in the person of Jesus Christ, who blurred (even sought to abolish) the lines of division that existed in Jesus’ day, two millennia ago. He was a scandal and a scoundrel to the religious leaders of his childhood because he ate with “sinners”, tax collectors, and non-Jews; he talked with adulterers, prostitutes, people of other religious traditions, and social rejects as though they were on a par with God’s children (which, of course, they were; that was the point). He was disruptive of the status quo; problematic to the powers that be.

Human beings have long preferred categories that help to keep things neat and tidy, if only in our minds. In fact, our minds are wired to sort things for a reason—it’s what helps us to comprehend things, to understand this world, and to get things done. Bringing order to things is one of the ways in which we are created in the image of God, who—as laid out in Genesis One and Two—brought order the chaos that existed before time began. Unfortunately, history bears witness to the fact that human category-making leads to destructive practices when those groupings are rooted in self-interest and not in love: Clean and unclean. Insiders and outsiders. White and colored. Etc.

It happens in the church as surely as it happens elsewhere. And it always has. The apostle Paul, in his first letter to that fledgling community in Corinth, was writing to a

group of Christians who were dividing themselves up according to class and race, according to who was more pure or less “pure”, and according to perceptions of who was more or less gifted with the presence of the Holy Spirit—and it was impacting how they worshiped and lived, making hypocrites of those who professed the love and values of Jesus Christ, but refused to allow certain individuals to take communion with them, or shunned their full participation in the community. Paul takes time to call out a variety of the causes for their fragmentation, one of which is some confusion about the ways in which the Holy Spirit works.

Last week, we heard about Jesus’ baptism. At the opening of the scene, John the Baptist announced that, whereas he baptized with water, the one who was coming after him would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. In Luke’s account, the Holy Spirit descended upon the baptized Jesus in the form of a dove, and a voice from heaven was heard declaring him God’s own beloved son. Although Paul was writing this letter to the Corinthians before Luke’s gospel was composed, they would likely have been familiar with the story as well as with the further testimony that, before Jesus departed from the presence of his disciples, he’d promised to bestow upon his followers the gift of the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly, some of the early believers began to adjudicate amongst themselves who *they* felt had the Holy Spirit and who didn’t; who were the “true Christians” and who weren’t. It’s sometimes a little bit amazing how little we’ve learned in these past two thousand years!

“I want you to understand something here,” writes Paul, making the argument for the dignity of each person and God’s self-expression in diversity: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.” Are you hearing it? The giver of the diversity is a single, same Creator God.

The apostle goes on to enumerate some of the gifts, and services, and activities that people might recognize in the community: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, various kinds of tongues, the interpretation of tongues—and that’s just off the top of Paul’s head. We could surely add more here if we tried. But the thing to keep in mind, Paul says, is that, “All of these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.” God knows what we need in order to do the work God has in mind for us to do; God equips each of us perfectly to be able to respond to our call and unique purpose. Furthermore, as he said earlier, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Every single one of us has at least one gift with which to do God’s work in the world. It’s not appropriate to be setting up hierarchies based on perceived gifts, because many will have gifts that aren’t necessarily as visible, obvious, or celebrated as others. That doesn’t mean that the less-visible or obvious ones are less important. Our calling is to use our gifts—the manifestations of God’s Spirit in our lives—***for the common good of all people***; not merely those like us, or those who make us comfortable.

It’s not unusual for Christians to be unaware of their gifts, or to be reluctant, unprepared to put them to use. Sometimes this is because we’re measuring ourselves

against others and deciding that we come up short. So, from fear of failure or disappointing others, or fear of what others might think of us, or what it might ask of us, or simple disbelief that we actually possess the power to do what God is inviting us to do, we deny ourselves the opportunity to grow in faith and a life that feels fully alive.

Sometimes, we might lack a sense of our gifts because we haven't yet discerned what it is that we're called to do. Beyond the universal call we all share to love God and love our neighbor, that is. In what specific way is God calling you to demonstrate your love for God and neighbor? What is God's unique purpose for your life?

The American writer and theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>1</sup> I like to paraphrase it this way: The place God calls you to is the place where your joy meets the world's deep need.

Sometimes, if we're anything like Jesus, it can take someone else to help us recognize our calling. (Sometimes, a woman; sometimes, even, a mother!)

Our gospel lesson represents perhaps the best-known of Jesus' miracles. Quite often, sermons on the text will throw the spotlight on the end of the story, where Jesus' faithful response to his call results in massive jugs of water becoming the finest wine. There are good and important things to be said about the symbolism of that moment and the deeper meaning of the observation that the inferior wine had been served first, and the fine wine saved until the end. But that's for another sermon.

Instead, I want to focus on the front part of this narrative, where there are powerful lessons about listening and love, honor and respect: crucial elements for meaningful, healthy, relationships. **And necessary practices in discerning gifts and call: our own, and others'.**

One of the most powerful things you can learn to do in life—one of the most important, fundamental works of love—is to listen. It's time-consuming and can be arduous, but I am convinced that real listening is in and of itself an act of honor and respect.

Jesus' mother had obviously been listening to what was going on at the wedding party, and was alert to the need—but also to how that need could be answered. "They have no wine," she says in the story. In her simple declaration, she communicates not only that she's been listening to what's going on around her, but also that she's been paying close attention to Jesus' gifts and abilities. It seems she may even know them better than Jesus does at that point; she communicates her trust and confidence in him with those words, and then with her words to the stewards whom she turns to next, saying, "Do whatever he tells you."

---

<sup>1</sup> From *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*.

Jesus, for his part, doesn't really seem to listen at first (or at least, he seems not to understand). He responds, "Woman, what concern is [it] to you and me [that they've run out of wine]? My hour has not yet come." But as his mother turns to speak to the stewards, Jesus demonstrates the effect that genuine listening quite often has: he softens. He considers what the woman who loves him has said, and he changes course. He demonstrates deep respect and honor for the one who has trusted him, and he responds accordingly. And—here's the miracle: his acts of listening, love, respect and honor wind up making it the best wedding party a lot of those guests had ever been to!

Here's the point of the message this morning: every one of us has been endowed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, which manifests in different ways in our lives. And every one of us is called, invited, summoned by God to use those gifts to continue the ministry Jesus started; it's why we've been endowed with the same Holy Spirit that animated and empowered Jesus. It's the same Holy Spirit that animated and empowered Martin Luther King and his compatriots in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and still moves us today to continue the divine struggle for the equal dignity and worth of every human being to be fully recognized and honored.

Whether your gifts are bold and obvious, or subdued and behind-the-scenes, God has a purpose for you—your participation is necessary and unique, and will help you to live a more abundant life when you identify and share them.

I can't say for sure, but I doubt that when he was a student at Boston University School of Theology, Dr. King had designs on getting a national holiday set aside in his honor. I do think he set himself to pursuing God's vision for the world, and he determined that he would use whatever gifts he had toward that end. He was given—just as you are and I am—specific abilities by the wisdom and purposes of the Holy Spirit, suited to meet the needs of God's work and unique call for his life. He and many others responded faithfully by listening, paying attention, and responding with action to the call of God to use those abilities in order to further the vision and mission of God—that same vision and mission expressed by the prophets of old, and embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the same Holy Spirit coursing through all of time, and through all people, including this day through you and me.

We are gifted and we are called. May we be found faithful. In Jesus' name. Amen.