

We are now in the time of year when it is not unusual for me to discover gifts which I meant to give for Christmas...which didn't quite make it into the, "*wrap, put it under the tree and open later*" cycle. This is nothing new for me. The year my room in Seminary had no more space than a single bed – a dresser and room for one person to walk between them I had to buy a second set of gifts for my mother and my sister because I couldn't find their gifts in my room before I went home for Christmas break. It was a kind of miracle really – just not in a good way.

Paul writes to the people he knows and loves in Corinth and shows that he knows they are a lot like me – *struggling to understand how it is God works in and through us and what it looks like in community* when we pay attention to the gifts we have been given.

It is too easy to read this passage as a *disembodied treatise* on gifts of the spirit. But friends, there is no such thing as a disembodied treatise in any letter in the New Testament. The letters were written to address needs which had cropped up in communities of faith: Real people, real problems, real direction for the future.

What do you know about Corinth? Most of us don't know much about any of the Biblical cities unless we have had reason to dig into them. When you think of Corinth you do well to think of a large, cosmopolitan city with not only a lot of people but also lots of different kinds of people living there.

One of the key markers of the church in Corinth was they had a lot of gifted people – who were struggling to understand what it means *to be gifted by God and live in community*. There are several places in Paul's letters to them which make this clear. My favorite is the refrain, "*Have you not known?*" It doesn't strike us as odd – but it would have been hitting the Corinthians right where they lived. *They were sure they knew* more than most people and the proof of God's blessing was the gifts they had. Yet, issues of daily living were proving hard for them.

For example, the marketplace had lots of places you could buy meat. But living in a world without freezers or refrigerators – it was hard to manage it. A short shelf

life followed by a quick turn to cooking. They would have considered our meat departments at grocery stores beyond imagination. Things were fine until one day somebody from church said, “Hey, I’ve got some meat from the market – why don’t you come over and share it with our family?” And the reply was something like, “Well, OK – but do you know where the meat came from?” “Well, I am pretty sure it was a cow.” “No, I want to know for sure the meat wasn’t offered to idols.” “Idols? Who cares about idols? We serve the living God and idols aren’t even real. Just come over for dinner.”

You might be thinking, “How novel, a church divided by theological difference.” But this was just the surface. The Corinthian church was the wild west when it came to *experiencing God’s spirit and leveraging gifts to be more important than other people*. In response, Paul writes what we had read for us today. He tells them they have misunderstood and takes a two-prong approach for making the expression of gifts a glue for the community instead of a solvent.

The bottom line, says Paul, is that gifts come from God. *Gifts are not the way we decide who God loves best.* Gifts are not the result of our efforts and skill. And because Gifts come from God, **everyone has gifts given by God**. And this comes under the “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” column of living. It doesn’t work out for us if we imagine giftedness *is a sign of ranking who is better than who*. And it really doesn’t work out for us *if we believe we have no gifts*. How on earth do we have courage to try and express the gifts God has given if we don’t believe they exist? For most of us, our gifts are so close we struggle to see them – and assume everyone else can do whatever we can.

Paul also emphasizes **the gifts we all have are for the common good**. We each have gifts other people need. If we don’t make the effort to do what we are able *we miss out on the satisfaction of sharing gifts and other people don’t get what they need*. God has organized life so we need one another – so we bless one another. It is a pattern that what God wants makes our life better – even if not easier.

Friends, gifts are made for giving. Dig down, discover, and appreciate your gifts. Then don’t forget where you put them so that when the time comes to share – *you will have the blessing of being a blessing*. And that will be a miracle for everyone involved in the best of all possible ways.