

Today is Pentecost- it comes from a Greek word meaning fiftieth day. On Pentecost the Holy Spirit is center stage, rushing as a wind through the early church and inflaming the hearts of Jesus' believers. Pentecost is a day of new creation- all things transformed and made new by the Word and Breath of the living God. It is a shame that the Holy Spirit gets put off on the Pentecostals and is often viewed as an afterthought for many Christians. Remember the two baptisms- the one John the Baptist did with water and the other one that really matters- Christ's baptism- the one with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matt. 3:11)?! It's hard for us in modern times to really comprehend the awe of Pentecost, isn't it? Some of us just say, "Oh, it's the birthday of the church," and it is, but it's also so much more- mysterious and complicated and beautiful. One preaching professor notes that "Pentecost isn't just a day; it's a way of living" (Karoline Lewis, *WP*). "In the last days," God declares, "I will pour out my Spirit upon *all flesh*" (Acts 2:17 quoting Joel 2:28-32). *All flesh*. Not just some people. That's the Acts 2 story quoting the prophet Joel. But today we're going to read from Paul's letter to the Church in Corinth. First, some context. In 1 Corinthians Paul identifies a wide gap between behavior of Christ followers- believers- and what is being lived out in the Corinthian church. He addresses this conflict and confusion surrounding spiritual gifts, worship, and community life. Remember that this is only 20 years post Jesus' resurrection, and this church thing is new. The church in Corinth was spiritually enthusiastic but deeply divided, with some believers treating certain gifts- especially speaking in tongues- as signs of greater importance or spiritual status. "How could they know that something was a gift of the Spirit and not merely

self-indulgence? Throughout this chapter through Chapter 14, Paul repeatedly challenges his readers to be careful with their assumptions so that they can align more closely with their new faith in Christ. In today's particular passage, Paul focuses on how the gifts of the Spirit are being used in worship in Corinth. Paul insists that how these gifts are used must be shaped by love (1 Cor. 13). Remember last week how Pastor Trevor reminded us that Jesus promised he would send an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, who would be the presence of the risen Christ throughout the world working to bring about the fullness of God's reign?! We must never forget that God's Spirit is at work right here, right now. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first pray.

PRAY. READ.

When I first started out in professional ministry among college students, I had a sign in my office that read, "Sarcasm is a spiritual gift." It was funny for a while until it wasn't. I naively thought it might make people laugh or smile, and it did for a few. However, one day a student walked in and while perusing my office for safety, landed on this sign. She did not understand sarcasm and had been hurt by it. She asked me how something so harmful could be a spiritual gift. She proceeded to then say that she thought that spiritual gifts were for building up God's kingdom not tearing it down?! That day the sign went away for good. Preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that "the church hasn't always done a great job knowing how to understand the gifts of the Spirit." She continues, "I mean, some of my parishioners were raised in Pentecostal churches where they felt dismissed or ignored for never having been

‘slain in the Spirit’ and so some of them told me they just resorted to pretending to speak in tongues so that they could belong and then that just felt weird” ([sermon](#)).

So, how do we as the church begin to talk about and perhaps identify and understand our spiritual gifts? “In the cultural buffet that is offered under the sign of ‘spirituality,’ this passage makes some important claims about the Spirit through which the church lives, and about the shape of faithful spirituality. Paul begins by insisting that the undeniable sign of the Spirit’s activity will be confession of Jesus as Lord. Paul connects the Spirit to Christ, so that the true manifestations of the Spirit are those which demonstrate that this is ‘the Spirit of Christ.’ Thus Christ himself becomes the measure by which genuine activity of the Spirit can be identified and all who confess this faith are under the power of the Spirit. This is a radically inclusive claim. As far as the Spirit is concerned, there will be no room for the categories that culture might use to divide the haves from the have-nots (Jews or Greeks, slaves or free)” (Brian Peterson, *WP*). Paul shares how to understand the Spirit’s activity in the church through the gifts of the believers. “The root of this word points to the nature of these gifts: the gifts are the result of God’s grace. The gifts of the Spirit are the active, experienced instances of God’s grace at work in the church (Peterson). And all believers are given such gifts of the Spirit. Yes, all. And these spiritual gifts are not about us. They are about God. Therefore, we are not to use them for selfish gain or fame. They are only for the glory of God. Nor are these gifts based on our natural abilities or talents. As one theologian reminds us “The Spirit

never gifts a person for private exaltation, but for public edification” (Sinclair Ferguson).

Spiritual gifts are just that- manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Paul says to that to each is given a gift from the Spirit for the common good. And the gifts he lists are: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, powerful deeds, discernment, prophesy, speaking in tongues and interpreting tongues. Notice where Paul places speaking in tongues. Pretty much at the end of the list. And you can just imagine why in the case of the church in Corinth! And notice that speaking in tongues cannot be listed without interpreting what is being said. Some of you may be thinking, “Now wait a minute, preacher lady. What are THOSE ?” I hear you. This list can sound daunting. I know I’d much prefer another list of spiritual gifts from Paul found in Romans (12:6-8)- ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and compassion. Or heck, I’ll even take the ones listed in Ephesians (4:11-13) rather than having to discern these. Why are these gifts different? Because we have to remember that Paul was writing to a specific group with specific gifts and challenges. “Paul wants the Corinthians to adopt a new way of looking at spirituality by seeing these abilities- these gifts- as a means through which God is alive and at work with grace and mercy for the whole community” (Peterson). And while going through each of these gifts would be a great Bible Study series, they won’t fit in today’s sermon. However, I do hope that you’ll take some time to explore them.

But Paul doesn't just leave it there. No. "Believers are not simply individuals who are empowered and gifted by the Spirit. They/we are interconnected parts of a single body, and it is to this image that Paul turns. Others in Paul's culture used the image of the body to strengthen the hierarchy of society" (Peterson). You know- human society is the body and the head, the philosophers and the politicians, told the body what to do. But Paul flipped this cultural body image on its head by suggesting that no members or parts of the body are more important or useful than any others. "In the body of Christ, behavior will not be determined by concern for honor and status, but by what builds up the whole body, by interdependence, and by love. The work of the Spirit, correctly understood, will result in a unified body of Christ, not in competition or division, since we all receive life and growth from the same flowing baptismal grace" (Peterson). Paul will go on to also say in the next chapter that spiritual gifts are governed by love rather than power, prestige, or division. Preacher and scholar, N. T. Wright drives Paul's point home when he says that, "the purpose of spiritual gifts is not self-expression but self-giving love." Therefore, "Paul places the great hymn to love in the center of spiritual gifts because gifts without love deform the church" (Gordon D. Fee). I don't know about you all, but I need the reminder that "the gifts of the Spirit are never about climbing ladders of holiness but about joining God's work in the world" (Rachel Held Evans). Preacher and historian, Diana Butler Bass, recently posted this ancient poem by Mechtild of Magdeburg, a Catholic Christian mystic

of the Middle Ages. It reminds us how these Spirit-given gifts when used must be shaped by love. Mechtild of Magdeburg writes,

Effortlessly, Love flows from God into humanity, like a bird who rivers the air without moving her wings. Thus we move in God's world, one in body and soul, though outwardly separate in form. As the Source strikes the note, humanity sings –The Holy Spirit is our harpist, and all strings which are touched in Love must sound (trans. by Jane Hirshfield).

Friends, with the Holy Spirit as our harpist and all strings touched in Love, we MUST sing our hearts out to God. Because can you imagine how incredibly boring it would be to have just a soprano or a bass singing? No, we need the altos, tenors, and those who can't find their notes and even those who don't call themselves "singers." Spiritual gifts are less supernatural status markers and more Spirit-enabled ways that we participate in God's work together. As we look around, the question is not: "Who has the most important gift?" but rather: "Whose gifts have we failed to recognize?" What? You say you don't have any clue as to what your spiritual gift or gifts may be?! Or perhaps you do but you aren't really using it for God's glory? Or maybe you have yet to explore further what your gifts look like? We can sit here and make up excuses all day long or we can lean into the Holy Spirit already present among us and at work. Paul says four or so times here that these gifts come from the Spirit and the same Spirit is given to all who believe. The Holy Spirit is a uniting force. So with these things in mind, the insert in your bulletin, is just a starting place. If you've taken a spiritual gifts' inventory before, I want you to set that aside. I invite you, if you feel so

led by the Spirit, to take the time to fill out this brief inventory. Pray before and after you take it asking God's Spirit to give you clarity, courage, and renewal as you explore your spiritual gifts. And once you have potentially identified one or two, don't brag about them. Use them for God's purpose and glory. Because we need each other and each other's gifts to be in unity as Christ's Body here on the corner of Rutherford and Stone. How do we know the work of the Holy Spirit among us? Paul tells us that "the Spirit proclaims Jesus as Lord, offers Her gifts to the church for the common good, and activates love for the neighbor. These criteria give us a place to start as we continue to look for what God is up to in our church and neighborhood today and everyday" (Mary Hinkle Shore, *WP*). For "it's as if this life of faith is a big jigsaw puzzle and each of us have a piece but the only way to begin to see the fullness of God is to bring these pieces God has entrusted to each of us together and then to stand with one another looking at it the beauty of it and say, "The gifts of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God"" (Bolz-Weber). Alleluia and Amen!