

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
I Corinthians 12: 12-31a
St. Luke 4: 14-21

Epiphany III 2022.

“But earnestly desire the higher gifts...” I Corinthians 12: 31a

In our culture, we usually think of “gifts” as a material thing one person gives another person to show we care – say, at Christmas, or on our birthday... Christians, however, understand that as we become Christians, God the Holy Spirit lives in us; he is deeply part of our lives... One of the things the Holy Spirit does is give at least one particular spiritual *gift* to that Christian. This gift – whatever it is – is meant to be used to build up the Church, or to advance God’s kingdom revealed through Jesus Christ...

All of us are called to common tasks as Christians. However, each one of us has something special, to offer one another... For example, all of us are to be witnesses that we follow Jesus Christ. (That’s a general calling for all Christians.) Some of us have a particular calling by God, which we learn to practice and to develop within the parish, to invite people to respond to Jesus Christ by faith – evangelization... Or to take another example, all of us can guide another person by teaching them something new. But some of us have a spiritual gifting to *teach* – we have a particular capacity to help others learn more...

When we give Christmas or Birthday gifts to one another, it’s a sign of love and fellowship, to bring joy to the receiver of the presents... When the Holy Spirit gives us gifts, they might be our joy and our delight. But the gifts of the Spirit are not mostly about how they make us feel – they are to make us more mature, more brave, and God-honouring; these gifts can be for the transformation of the world... Human gifts are mostly to give us pleasure. God’s spiritual gifts are mostly to make us great...

In today’s second reading, from First Corinthians 12, Paul writes about spiritual gifts within the Body of Christ, the Church... Paul makes the point that we all have something to offer, and there is to be no sense of superiority among the gifts... Because I wash the linens and you preach, that doesn’t make me better than you. (It doesn’t make me worse than you either...) In the world around us, many people have senses of superiority over others. That is not the way of the Lord Jesus... In contrast, the Christian Church is at its best when it is *flat*: The gifts of the person of prayer are no better or worse than the administrator, or any other gift... Paul compares the Body of Christ to a human body: The ear is not superior to the nose or any other part of our body (including those body parts we are modest about). Every part of the human body, working together, contributes to a healthy human body. In the same way, every Christian working together harmoniously contributes to beautiful, healthy parish – the local expression of the catholic Church...

We all have different roles and responsibilities, including those of leadership. We are no better or worse than others in the next pew. In fact, we are not superior to people who have no faith at all – we’re just learning to admit the depth of our need, and the breadth of God’s beautiful grace...

Last week we learned about the spiritual gift of “prophecy,” and how that can be exercised well within the local Church. Let’s look at another one of those gifts mentioned in First Corinthians 12 – the ability to “distinguish between spirits...” What does this gift mean? What does this gift – to distinguish between spirits – look like, when it is exercised in parish life?...

To begin, we can agree that there are spiritual practices which are God-honouring, and those which are not... If we have a sense of peace, if we are developing a deep sense of gratitude even in the most difficult of times, if in our own way we are becoming more deeply in love with Jesus Christ, if we are learning to love and appreciate even people who have some clear foibles and flaws, if we are seeing the Church on earth with both its flashes of beauty and its occasional warts, and getting tiny glimpses of heaven – then we are moving in the spiritual direction that God wants us to move to...

In contrast, if we are becoming more selfish or more cynical, if we are losing hope, if we’re starting to get the idea that our drinking or the medications we use are controlling us, if we are keeping company with people who do not honour God in their own lives, these aren’t spiritually healthy practices, there are spiritually harmful practices. We’re called to learn to leave these behind as we follow Christ...

So we can say there is a spirituality which is “good” and Christ-honouring – which ultimately have their source in God himself – and there are spiritual elements which do not honour God, which we need to learn to leave behind... So we see there is spiritual good, and spiritual evil...

A red flag – a danger sign – is when a Christian acts in secret, in ways which dishonour God. Sin tends to be secretive... Here are a few examples: If a man or a woman is married, that’s a public fact. (We don’t hide our spouses.) But if someone is cheating on their spouse in secret, or if they are consuming digital pornography, or if they are participating in human trafficking, these are secret behaviours which are taking us in the wrong direction. With a commitment of the will, and usually, with support from trusted people, (as Romans reads) we need to be transformed by the renewing of our minds...

Among many examples we could use, another examples are our use of alcohol or other drugs; or compulsive gambling. If we’re starting to drink or to use in secret, to hide their effects from people we love, that’s a warning sign. If people who love us are courageous enough to say they’re concerned about us, or if our financial well-being is affected, these are other warning signs...

So we see that sin tends to be secretive and hidden. In contrast, the gospel is openness, light and life. We are in the middle of the season of Epiphany, which means “manifestation.” Christians believe that God’s ways are no longer mysterious – they are manifested or revealed through the Lord Jesus...

Especially in the first through third centuries, there was a spiritual movement called “Gnosticism.” Gnostics believed they really knew – they thought they really figured out on their own (God didn’t show them) – what God is like... The Gnostics said, “If you want to know what God is like, join our secret group, and we’ll share it with you.” (The New Age spirituality today has elements of Gnosticism.) In contrast, the catholic Church, the universal Church of orthodox Christians, said, “No! The gospel is not a secret! Anyone is invited to come and share what is shown for all people...”

All of us are entitled to some privacy. But secrets and mysteries often are associated with unhealthy spiritualities...

So let’s return to the spiritual gift of “discerning between spirits...” Some of us are *un*-discerning. I won’t say the person’s name, but I knew a colleague (bless him) who always wanted to affirm anything he came across! He would come across a book with a new idea: “Oh, that’s nice.” Then he might read another book with a different idea, “Oh, my – that’s nice too!” And then he might come across a third idea, and agree with that too!... But sooner or later there will be a contradiction – opposites can’t both be true in the same way! Bless him, that man did not have the spiritual gift of discernment – he couldn’t easily tell right from wrong... Sometimes the gift of discernment between spirits is between right and wrong ideas, about the gospel...

Sometimes this gift of discernment is about moral behaviour... Have you ever heard a speaker, and everyone else seems to think he or she is great, but something doesn’t just “sit right” with you? It might be hard to put your finger on it, but you’re a little uncomfortable. There’s something about the speaker than makes you uneasy... We might find out later that the speaker was involved with financial mismanagement. Or we might learn that a Christian leader got caught up in a sex scandal... It doesn’t have to be a famous person. Part of the gift of spiritual discernment, I suggest, can be a sense that a person is morally out of synch...

So this spiritual gift of discernment between spirits is having a specially good insight – from God – about truth and falsehood, or moral goodness and sin... If we think we might carry this spiritual gift, then the same guidance applies for exercising all spiritual gifts within the Church: Let’s take time for humble self-examination, let’s encourage one another to exercise our gifts effectively within the parish. I encourage people to see the Rev. Marie or myself to work through how this gift is best exercised, whether it’s in the Sunday morning liturgy, or in a small group, or in one of the councils of the Church... It our job to coordinate the exercise of gifts in the local Church...

We might remember that last Sunday, I said that for someone who has the gift of prophecy, that can be a lonely kind of calling, and it's important that we press in close in the fellowship of the Church... What about the gift of discerning between spirits? If someone carries that gift, what do they need to watch out for?... The person who carries that gift of discernment needs to guard against being judgmental... God is the Judge, not us. Our job is to learn to love deeply...

I mentioned a few minutes ago that there are ways we can be moving toward what is spiritually good and light, or spiritual habits which draw us away from God, from light to darkness... If we're aware that we're struggling in some area of our lives, we're not meant to struggle on our own, in secret! Here is an environment where we can learn to shed the grime, and to be clothed with the new robes of the heavenly banquet. The beginning point is to want our lives to be different. The next step is to share our struggles with someone who is safe, who can help us journey to be more fully in the light...

We all have been given spiritual gifts of one kind or another. Among them is the gift of spiritual discernment... First Corinthians 12 is a wonderful passage in teaching about spiritual gifts. But at the end of it all, Paul writes, "And I will show you a still more excellent way." Then Paul writes this amazing poem about Christian love...

May God's love infuse us in all things. May we learn to love in response, and love ourselves, and love our neighbours, near and far. May we learn to exercise our spiritual gifts with sensitivity and insight. May all that we do, be done in love.

Amen.