



Sermons

from Northwood United Church

“The Purpose of the Church”
1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:14-21
Will Sparks January 27, 2013

May the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts and the actions of our lives be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

If someone on the street or perhaps a co-worker or friend came up and asked you, “what is the church?” how would you answer that question? Just imagine the conversation for a moment. “The Church. You mean my church? Well it’s a place I go on Sunday’s. It’s a place where some of my friends are. It’s a place where we talk about God and sing and pray and learn.” What are some other ways you would answer that question?

The way you answer it also depends on who you’re talking to and what the situation is. More than once in my time as a minister, and this happens at particular times of financial stress in the church, someone will say “well on one level at least the church is a business.” There is income and expenses and you need... What is the church?

Paul had to come up with an answer to that question at the earliest time in the life of the church- at the very beginning. In some ways, he had to answer not so much what is the church but what is the church going to be? At this time, there hadn’t been a church. There was no tradition to draw on. So he was making it up as he went, and, by God’s grace he offered the image of the church as a body- the body of Christ. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and the members, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... Indeed the body does not consist of one member, but of many...” The community as an organism whose life Spirit come from God, whose unifying energy is God. And every member of the body has a part to play, and no member is either expendable or all important. The community is an organism, a body, and we move and breath in an interdependent way. When one member is honoured, all share in the reflected honour. When one suffers, all suffer together. Ah, a vision of life as God would have it.

But there is a critical piece of that vision, and that is that we are all gifted, but we somehow need to know that. We all have a part to play in the whole but each of us needs to know that part and know it well enough in our heart and soul that we do not hesitate to play out part. So the question becomes, what is my part? What is the gift that I bring to the body? What part am I called to play?

Interesting, that wasn’t a question that was hard for Jesus to answer when he made his way out of the desert and back to his home town of Nazareth. In our gospel reading we heard that Jesus returned from his time in the desert, 40 days. He had experienced the Spirit at his baptism, and had immediately gone out to the desert to sort things out. We aren’t told whether or not he went out there with questions in his mind about what it all meant, what God called him to do or be in his life, but it is pretty clear when he makes his way into Nazareth, he knows now. And he makes his way into the synagogue, picks up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and lays it out clearly. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...” I know my holy purpose. I know the spiritual gift I am called to embody here. I know the part I play.

It is a wonderful thing when someone finds their giftedness, finds their calling, finds the thing they are called to offer in their life. We were at a Robbie Burns night last night and Kendrick piped in the Haggis and played a little solo. And I was reminded of the time a couple of years ago when Kendrick was sitting in the back seat on the way home from pipe band practice,

and feeling so great about learning what he was learning. And this happy wise clear voice comes from the back seat. “You know what? I think I was born to be a piper... Its good when someone finds out what they were born to do...”

You smile, thinking of this little 9 year old with the confidence to proclaim what he is born to do. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to play the pipes.” The thing is though, he’s right. I mean, who knows about the pipes. I think what we see there is a little person who has found a real place of giftedness and fit in his life. And he is also right that that is a beautiful thing when a person finds that. And I think that it is in us all, that God has offered every one of us gifts that are meant to be offered. And it is a beautiful thing when we discover these gifts and have a place and time and opportunity to offer them. “Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to come round where we ought to be, and when we find ourselves in a place just right, it will be in the valley of love and delight. Finding our giftedness.

I want you to have an opportunity to explore that giftedness within you. There is an instrument and a process through which we help people explore their spiritual gift. It is called the “Spiritual gifts Inventory.” It is a kind of survey, set of questions that have been devised and calibrated to measure giftedness in different areas of spiritual life. It is not perfect. There is no test you can take to discover your gift. Life is not that easy. But this inventory of 110 simple questions offers a starting place for us to then look at and talk about the various different Spiritual gifts and which one or two or three God might have placed in us. Have you been given the gift of prayer, the ability and inclination to hold life in a quiet way, to open to God in prayer and give and receive in that way? Have you been given the gift of organization, to see clearly actions needed to achieve goals in an organization, to organize resources and people and do what it takes to tend the needs of an organization? Have you been given the gift of assisting, the great work of supporting, of caring for the practical, often behind the scenes tasks that make life work? Have you been given the gift of faith, of giving, of healing, of hospitality? There are so many spiritual gifts, and God has placed them in us. They are what I talked about last week, our assignments. And it is for us to discover what is within us and then to offer it.

Next Sunday after church, Penny, bless her heart, has offered to make a finger food lunch and I invite as many of you as can, after church, to pick up your coffee, pick up a little food and then gather for an hour or an hour and a half with me, to take the spiritual gift inventory, to use it as a tool to talk about what spiritual gifts God has placed within you. It is really a fun exploration that is a critical part of our Christian walk- knowing our giftedness, and learning to offer it. And I believe that one of the purposes of the church is to help people find their place of giftedness and to create a culture and a setting where we can explore that and offer it.

God’s dream for us as a church is that we be the body of Christ, a living, breathing organism, made of interconnected members who know, as Kendrick put it, “What they are born to be..” know their holy purpose, the part they are called to play. God’s dream is of interdependent community, of people with gifts that are discerned, understood, cherished, nurtured, offered and received. What is your part in this body? Amen