

Sunday, January 20, 2013

Second Sunday After Epiphany

**Encountered by God's Embrace: Sharing Gifts Which Reveal God**

Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

God lavishes upon us gifts of grace – actually the manifestation of the outpouring of the Spirit in our lives.

As we are immersed in the life of the Spirit, out from us flow rivers of living water, as Jesus expresses in John 7 – **there is an abundance that pours forth from our lives.**

An abundance we can try to keep to ourselves (i.e., my gift), which Walter Brueggemann states that if we do so, **leads to greed and violence,**

But, if we share our gifts, recognizing these are gifts given to us by God as an abundance we are to freely share, **it leads us into generosity and peacemaking.**

For many in North America, religion is a private experience.

But is this to be so?

Is our walking with God, being immersed in God, simply about our own religious experience – “feasting on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from the river of delights?”

This reminds me a little of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*

– are we ones who eagerly gobble up the delights that Willy Wonka has to offer, **OR** are we ones who in receiving such delights eagerly share them with others?

These gifts of grace flowing out of our lives

- participating with God in God's mission
- sharing the gifts of the Spirit which are poured out into our lives
- these are not meant merely for our own spirituality
- **but for creating shalom in the world.**

In talking about these passages at our Saturday morning Engaging Scripture group, we saw a connection between our exercising our Spirit-given gifts and *The Five Love Languages* shared by Gary Chapman.

In his book Chapman expresses that we all express and receive love in different ways.

He identifies these different ways as “languages of love.”

Some receive love through a spouse or a friend spending quality time with them

- others require words of affirmation
- others know they are loved when their spouse or friend brings them gifts – or performs loving acts of service
- and some need physical touch to know they are loved.

If I give Lynne a gift and her language of love is words of affirmation, my gift giving may be appreciated but not necessarily be received as an act of love in the way Lynne needs to be loved.

In a similar manner, this helps us understand the diversity of the Spirit's gifts poured out upon us  
– we do not have all the same gifts.

The problem has been that some gifts have been elevated as being more spiritual than others  
– such as speaking in tongues, or gifts of healing  
– and so the people of God have tried to get the “best gifts.”

But each gift is necessary, as Paul expresses: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone, it is the same God at work. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for **the common good.**”

We exercise our gifts not for our benefit, but in participating with God in ministry for the common good  
– for the benefit of all.

I came to a realization this week as I was meeting with a triad of pastors I regularly meet with  
– I realized that most churches focus on involving people in ministry for the left over hours of our weeks; **the hours which we classify as volunteer hours** – not for the other 100 or so hours in our weeks.

But such a focus misses the whole point of exercising our gifts for the common good.

It is all upside down in relation to where our focus is to be in our being followers and disciples of Jesus.

I looked up some stats on our volunteering in America.

On average adults and teenagers in America contribute 3.5 volunteer hours per week  
– and though that is impressive when we add it all together  
– about 8 billion hours with a contributed value of over \$171 billion (cf. [volunteeringinamerica.gov](http://volunteeringinamerica.gov) and [networkforgood.org](http://networkforgood.org)).

As churches we often focus on ministry development for these 3.5 hours of our week  
– what about the other 100 -105 hours of our lives?  
– at work, in our homes, in our neighborhoods – where we live?

Jesus in commanding us to “go and make disciples” did not express, “go and make disciples with the leftover hours in our weeks,”

But, rather “as you go about living your lives, be about making disciples.”

The Spirit of God pours out gifts in our lives, by all means for the 3.5 hours of our volunteer time  
– **but more so for the 100+ hours of our lives.**

**It is in these times that we live most of our life and it is in these times we are most about being the disciples of Jesus, sharing the love and presence of God in the world.**

Revealing and demonstrating God's love for all humanity in the world, takes all kinds of ways, all kinds of gifts

So, it takes all of us to exercise our Spirit given gifts.

**I have made some discoveries about the gifts of grace which the Spirit pours out in our lives:**

**First**, the primary places of our ministry are not where we are when we are volunteering, but where we spend the majority of our time.

Lynne's is a ministering presence at Condell as a nurse

– she is engaged more than just being a nurse, she is a disciple of Jesus ministering sharing God's presence and love as she does her work as a nurse.

She is not only trained as a nurse, but she is gifted by the Spirit to express the love of God through compassion, through gifts which the Spirit pours out through her to touch the lives of others with the presence of God.

Dennis is more than a professor,

Patty is more than a teacher,

Jeff is more than a teacher,

Karen is more than a teacher,

So are Cliff, Larry, and Gerry.

They are disciples of Jesus ministering sharing God's presence and love as they teach

– utilizing not only their teaching skills, but also the gifts of the Spirit poured out through their lives touching the lives of students with the presence of God.

Dale, Kenton, Phil, Cindy, Mark, Anita do not just work at Abbvie and Abbott, but are disciples empowered by the Spirit of God as they do what they do.

They are educated for what they are doing, but they minister at Abbvie and Abbott empowered by the Spirit of God.

I could say the same for all of us in all of our places of employment.

The same goes for our lives at home and in our neighborhoods.

There is much more to our discipleship and our ministry than what we do with the leftover hours of our week, which we give to volunteering.

**Second**, I have also discovered that God pours out his love through gifts which are often connected to our personality styles.

For example, I have the ability to connect with people in ordinary places, engaging in conversation, interpreting ways God is present in their lives;

Linda has the ability to receive such people and provide hospitality, a place to lay their head.

It is not that my gift is superior to Linda's or Linda's superior to mine – we both have different gifts, different ways of sharing God's love in the presence and power of the Spirit

– and both of us are needed to participate fully in sharing God's love. And it takes more than Linda and I to share God's love.

It takes all of us sharing our spiritual gifts, our gifts of grace, to fully share the love of God in the world in the unique ways the Spirit is manifest through us.

**Third**, there is another thing I have discovered in sharing God's love.

These gifts, these graces we have received from the Spirit are never "ours" to control.

It is not the gift which is the key thing in any situation. **The key thing is that we embody the presence of God.**

It is not about the gift, but rather, it is about being open to the Spirit.

And in being open to the Spirit, we make ourselves available to God's Spirit, who then is free to share God's love through us in diverse ways, in diverse "love languages."

Years ago, when I was in pastoral ministry in Elkhart, having many aging and ill people within our congregation, I discovered that on numerous occasions when I prayed for healing in people's lives, God brought healing.

Now, that discovery did not lead me to start a healing ministry,  
But what I did discover was that God at times would share God's love through me by bringing healing to a person.

I still pray for God to heal, and maybe God's shares God's love by healing, but I do not see it happening as often  
– perhaps because we do not struggle with the same level of illness;

Yet, I am discovering that God expresses God's love in different ways – through listening, walking alongside, sharing the comfort and presence of God in my ministry among you.

The reason for this is not that I own a particular gift, but rather, I seek to be open for the Spirit to freely flow through me with whatever gift that may demonstrate God's grace, mercy, God's love in the world.

When we share the love of God in the diversity of the Spirit's gifts, in whatever place we find ourselves, we are being missional.

Being missional embraces all of our lives  
– especially the 100+ hours of our lives.

It is seeing where God is active in our worlds;  
It is seeing where God is pouring out God's love.  
We participate together with God in showing God's love through the particular gifts we have been given by the Spirit.

During Epiphany, and during every day of our lives, **may we be vessels of God's love poured out into the world.**

May we be open to the gifts of love the Spirit seeks to pour out through us  
– let us love one another, let us love whomever God brings into our lives to love  
– for sure in the 3.5 hours of our weeks, but more so, in the 100+ hours of our lives.