

Pastor's Message – 8/23/20  
Romans 12:1-8

Psychologists joke that the two most stress-inducing experiences of human life are approaching death and public speaking. When God offers up the gift of speaking, how many of us would be inclined to run forward begging, "Me, me, oh please let me be the public speaker!" In 20 years, I've never had anyone yet stop me at the door on Sunday morning and say, "Pastor, you can have today off, I want to preach." It can even be unlikely for someone to be willing and comfortable to offer a prayer at the beginning of a meeting or a choir rehearsal. Most often, people will leave it to the "professional prayers," namely clergy.

I have had a number of years' experience and I've always had a gift for public speaking and leading music or performing music in public, so it might be easier for me. But in spite of that, I've been trying for years to encourage anyone to offer prayer and perhaps even to rotate an opening prayer at meetings, etc. I would expect that you all pray: certainly privately, or perhaps at home and mealtimes. Some of those prayers might be spontaneous; some of them might be written and read from a book. Not everyone has the gift of spontaneous prayer.

But we all have gifts given by God for Christian service and witness and for the good of the church. I mention it specifically today in light of our Bible reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans and in light of our upcoming, but as of yet unscheduled, Church/Charge Conference. The SPRC has already met as we anticipate our 2020 Church Conference for next year. The other Committees or Boards have met or will be meeting soon to prepare for that Church/Charge Conference which will, because of the coronavirus pandemic, be different than we have experienced in years past. As part of our Church/Charge Conference, we will be looking for individuals within the Church to serve in various capacities: as Committee or Board members or even as Chairs of Committee or Boards. Each person, Paul says, has been given gifts, both for the church as institution and for everyday life.

All of you, I would expect, have gone through various transitions in your life in which you have played different roles and been called by different names. Perhaps you had a professional title; perhaps you were known by the job you did. You may have been Dad or Mom or brother or sister. Maybe you have been and still are Grandma or Grandpa or even Great-Grandpa or Great-Grandma. Maybe you had pet names in your

family? Maybe you've just been known by your first name, like Michelangelo or Da Vinci or Beyonce or Oprah, and that has been enough for anyone to know you?

Our names or our titles indicate something of who we are or who we have been and reflect our individual characteristics, interests, strengths or skills and gifts. A few years ago, during one weekend in professional baseball, the players were allowed to wear nicknames on their uniforms and to have non-regulation colors for the bats they can use. The nicknames printed on their uniforms shed some light on the personalities and personal characteristics of the players beyond the ball field.

In Paul's Letter today, he identifies some characteristics and gifts that God gives to followers of Jesus. He talks about preaching and teaching and encouraging and offering advice. He talks about management and supervision and helping and missions. All of the gifts he mentions can make a difference in people's lives. Within yourselves (body, mind, heart, soul), you have gifts and strengths that can make a difference in people's lives both on a personal level and a larger playing field like the church.

What are your gifts? Which gifts do you recognize as gifts that are transformative – those that make a difference? But maybe this discussion is “preaching to the choir?” Maybe you've already gone through this and you have identified your particular God-given gifts and are using them for the good of the church and the community and in your families?

Except that, not that anyone could not notice, things have changed. Our community, our culture, our world, our church is different than it used to be. The Church of today is not the Church of yesterday and will certainly not be the Church of tomorrow. A different Church requires different gifts or at least a different way of using the gifts you have been given.

In the Roman context to which Paul was writing, Christian community was very intimate. The church in Rome was really a collection of several small house churches where many of the participants literally shared the same house, may have worked together through the day, and shared daily meals and prayers morning and night. Church community was not a theoretical construct, or something they might experience occasionally as their otherwise disparate schedules might allow. It wasn't like the context of Church that we may have grown up with. Church wasn't a once-a-week, Sunday gathering. Community was the constant reality of their daily lives with each other. In this context Paul's language of the church as body made sense, especially within each of the house communities.

Chances are strong such an intimate experience of community does not describe even the life of many “nuclear families” in your congregation today. Today, parents, children and other family members sharing the same living space may spend more time talking or communicating via social media with persons not physically present or otherwise interacting with screens (whether television, smart phone, tablet, or computer). We are separated by social distancing and, in some cases, can only visit through a window or by phone or some virtual meeting technology like Facetime or Skype or Zoom.

So how do we take a Bible text like this written to a community built on intimate face to face relationships and apply it for worship and church life now in the midst of social distancing and the wearing of face coverings?

You've probably noticed that most churches of today are small churches. The Waupun UMC has shrunk in size and could now be considered a small church based on the number of people who are active members. I believe that small churches are viable and that small churches can be strong and healthy churches which do good ministry and do the things that God wants for us to do. I believe that God sends the gifts that are needed to do the work God wants us to do. The unique gifts of God in us continually provide opportunities for transformation enabling us to be the Church that God wants. The future is rapidly becoming reality and we have the opportunity to become a new and transformed Church.

God has graced this church and woven its members together with a variety of gifts. These, gifts, like each person who receive them, differ. Yet, we belong to one another because we belong to Christ. The image of the church suggests a patchwork quilt of varying colors and textures or a stained-glass window rather than a monotone flat sheet.

In Paul's Letter today, he names some gifts with which Jesus graces the church. Naming these particular gifts does not suggest there are no more. Paul leaves it for the church in his day and our day to identify other gifts. He urges us to identify our God-given gifts in terms of our faith and in terms of our belonging to Christ and to each other and to our Church and to use our gifts in every context: in everyday, ordinary life and in how we can serve God in the Church. Each person is special, so what is special and different about being in and part of this Church? How are you using your special gifts to serve and to transform this Church into what it will become?

The grace of God gifts us to live as faithful and faith-filled people and to build and care for our Church by exercising and practicing our gifts. We have been created to be part of a community and part of a Church. So how do we discern our gifts and the gifts of others? How do we encourage and grow our gifts and the gifts of others? How do we apply God's way of considering those gifts and using them and growing them so we can offer ourselves every more fully in sacrifice to God and service to others and our Church?

The Holy Spirit gives each of us a variety of different gifts for us to offer to strengthen the whole community. Paul lists a sampling of these in verses 6-8. Note that the gifts listed here are focused not on the "institution" of the church, but on the core activities of the Christian community with each other and on mission in the world—proclaiming God's living word, serving others, teaching, coaching, giving, leading, and offering mercy. It is not just important to use your gifts in the Church but also beyond the Church – to use them in service everywhere at all times.

We can focus on the things we don't have, but perhaps it's best to start with strength before going to weakness. Start with examples of how the church works well and then take some positive next steps before moving on to address how we may or may not yet be as transformed as perhaps it ought to be. Starting with lifting up your strengths creates greater awareness for dealing with whatever improvements or critiques may need to be offered.

I'd like to suggest one way. You probably have a paper calendar at home – you can still get them if you don't. Take that calendar and every day, write down one positive thing about your church and consider how you are a part and contributing to that positive thing. Next, every day, write down one thing you did that day to express your faith and live your faith in your everyday life. They can be intentional things, or they can be what we could call "random acts of kindness."

Look for opportunities to "love your neighbor." Increase your prayer life. Set aside time or money you might normally spend on yourself to aid someone in need. Look for opportunities to use your gifts in and for the church. Such activities will both grow your faith and grow your Church. Such activities are a way to affirm your individual gifts, give thanks for your individual gifts, and use those gifts to make this a more God-filled world.