

Most of us have been to the dentist. Some of us don't mind it. Some of us do. Yet how many of us have ever wanted to be a dentist, a dental assistant, or a dental hygienist? Think about it. Each day you would spend looking into the mouths of strangers, some of whom would be there for a reason (i.e., poor hygiene) while others would give any reason not to be there.

What could be more gross — and thankless?

Yet imagine what life would be like without access to proper dental care. How would you deal with the sometimes-excruciating pain of a toothache? What would it be like chewing food without fillings, crowns, or dentures? And what kind of picture would you take for your high school prom or the church directory?

This week I saw the dentist. I was grateful. I had reached the last stop on what some would identify as a trail of orthodontic tears, the kind that involves a lot of time in the chair followed by a lot of heartache paying the bill! Fortunately, my teeth were in good working order, and I was no longer in pain — hence my gratitude.

Yet I was also perplexed. I simply could not fathom what would possess someone to work in the field of dentistry. So, I asked the dental assistant. Why do you do what you do? What's the draw?

At the end of my message today, I will share with you her answer. Before that, however, I want to ask you what I asked her: why do you do what you do for work or as a volunteer? If you volunteer for Queen Anne Lutheran, what compels you? What inspires you?

The Gifts of the Spirit

Paul addresses the question of why we do what we do vocationally in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, our second reading for today.

According to Paul, every Christian has a vocation (see 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3). To have a vocation means to be called to a certain activity for the benefit of others. In Paul's language, the Spirit moves us to fill particular roles or functions "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). The common good can refer to society as a whole, as evident in Galatians 6:10. It can also refer to the church in particular, as it does in 1 Corinthians 12.

Here we have a great example of how Paul challenges a prevailing assumption in our culture, which serves as benefit for reading him. While many people these days speak of their work exclusively as a "labor of love" or cite "personal fulfillment" as the reason for why they do what they do, Paul invites us to make "common fulfillment"

our ultimate aim and purpose instead. The two are not mutually exclusive, moreover. One simply leads to the other.

How, then, do we find (or confirm) our various vocations? Ask this question: how can your deep gladness meet the world's deepest need (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*)?

How, in other words, can you use the talents from which you derive joy to help those around you?

Find the answer to that question, Paul might add, and you have found your purpose in life: serve others and you enhance yourself in the process.

The Consequences

Now let's stop to consider what might happen if we ignore a calling. On a broad scale, we would have a lot more toothaches. Why? Because dentists are ideally people who use their skills (talents) to help us (service) when it comes to oral health. When the goal is not exclusively personal fulfillment or profit, the *occupation* of dentistry becomes a *vocation* which can mean better care for each of us – not to mention more fulfilling work for the dentist too!

But what about the church? Perhaps Paul took for granted the fact that without the contribution of talents or special abilities on the part of its members, it collapses.

We can't.

Think of what a lack of volunteers could mean for Queen Anne Lutheran: without the individuals who use their talents to make this ministry possible, tens of thousands of dollars each year would no longer be distributed to organizations in our neighborhood who serve people in need; quilts, care packages, and monetary forms of disaster relief would no longer be sent across the country as well as throughout the world; the meaning and belonging that comes with our fellowship in Christ through worship, women's circles, and Bible studies would dissolve; the isolated among our members and the marginalized in our community would lose our support; the arts – particularly music – would no longer connect us to what matters most; our young people would have no alternative to the inverted values of selfishness and consumption that pervade our culture; and the increasingly rare opportunity to learn about our faith in a question-friendly environment would crumble apart and blow away.

We could add more to this list, but you see the point. Performing even small acts of service that draw upon our abilities can make a world of difference in our faith community, neighborhood, and world. Obviously, times in life occur when volunteering is not an option, times where we need to receive rather than give. But what happens when nobody agrees to give by fulfilling the roles necessary for our ministry and worship-life to function?

What do we do, in short, when we have no ushers to welcome people into our sanctuary or volunteers to serve food to the hungry poor?

More Than Meets the Eye

Paul can help, albeit not at first glance. The most attention he gives to the topic of spiritual gifts appears in 1 Corinthians 12. There, as noted, we learn why each of us has different talents or abilities, namely, to achieve the common goal of building up the body of Christ. God wants us to thrive, and God achieves that through us *in terms of our differences*.

That's rather remarkable, isn't it? Rather than our differences being a source of conflict, we can use them to help each other.

Here's the problem: not all of the gifts Paul identifies in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 have a clear meaning. To some, he says, the Spirit gives wisdom, to others knowledge, and to others faith; the Spirit likewise dispenses gifts for healing, the ability to perform miracles, the discernment of spirits, the capacity to prophesize, speak in tongues or interpret tongues.

These terms are foreign. They belong to the thought-world of the first century, a time where exorcism was the common way to deal with ailments. How, then, do we update them to fit our situation today?

Without access to the experience of the people who received these gifts according to Paul, we have to guess what they mean. Martin Luther, for example, understood the ability to speak in tongues as simply the ability to preach the gospel. For him, it had nothing to do with the kind of ecstatic experience Pentecostals would associate with the phenomenon several hundred years later.

Prophecy is another difficult term to define. Most of us think of it as the capacity to foretell the future. Yet as Robert Wilson explains in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, "Prophets were usually intent on speaking to present circumstances [on behalf of God, rather] than to future ones, and they were often more concerned with faithfulness to what was imbedded in Israel's traditions than to the development of new paradigms" (p. 833).

The prophet, in other words, was responsible for communicating God's will to other members of the faith community. He or she served as a mediator between God and human beings. Teachers and speakers in tongues performed the same function.

Perhaps the best way to grasp the meaning of the various spiritual gifts we find in Paul is to divide them into three categories. As Victor Furnish explains, we have "gifts of utterance" which include prophecy and knowledge, "gifts of practical ministry" which involve caring for the needy, and "gifts of wonder-working faith" like healing and performing miracles (*ibid.*, 990). Only two out of these three headings, however, appear in today's reading – gifts of utterance and gifts of wonder-working.

How, then, did Furnish come up with the last category, gifts of practical ministry? The answer, and I find this fascinating, is that Paul refers to these gifts later in the same chapter as well as in Romans 12:6-8. Additional lists can be found in 1 Peter 4:10-11 and Ephesians 4:11. Why makes these lists intriguing? Because they include additional gifts we might not otherwise be inclined to define as “spiritual.”

The Lists

Let’s start with Romans 12:6-8. Paul writes, “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation (preaching); the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

Now these are terms to which we can relate! The church, Paul says, needs ordinary, everyday people with the gifts like compassion, generosity, and the ability to teach for the sake of building up others. Miracle-workers need not apply! Here, moreover, Paul tells us that God inspires these abilities within us as an expression of God’s grace, that is, God’s unconditional love.

Love, in other words, makes up our chief vocation. Out of it, we serve others. We give. We reach out. We accompany, and all of it comes from love. No wonder Paul spends the entire chapter following our second reading discussing it. Love is our highest calling.

Consider now the gifts Paul adds at the end of chapter 12: gifts of healing, forms of assistance (i.e., caregiving), and forms of leadership. These are the gifts of “practical ministry” so essential to our church which were absent in our reading.

The author of 1 Peter summarizes the importance of all gifts for the sake of the ministry. “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,” he writes, “serve one another with *whatever gift* each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ” (vv. 10-11a).

Do you hear what Peter and Paul are saying?

All Christians have a calling, and that calling is to serve one another for the sake of the common good. If enjoy being a leader and have the gift for it, consider serving on our council or executive team. If you thrive when you care for others, whether in person or on the phone or via Zoom or by writing cards, then be part of our Visitation Team. You have a gift! You don’t need to perform miracles or speak in tongues, whatever those terms may have meant to Paul. Just use your gift(s) to help others.

A Blueprint for Changing the World

In the remaining chapter of our second reading, Paul draws out the radical implication of what it means to serve each other as part of one body, the body of Christ. Obviously,

he writes playfully, the “head cannot say to the feet, ‘I have no need for you’” (1 Corinthians 12:21). All of the body’s members are necessary.

Paul’s metaphor of the body offers a blueprint for changing the world, or at least our corner of it. As Jouette Bassler explains in the *Women’s Bible Commentary*, “Paul applies a familiar body metaphor to the community [of faith] in an unprecedented way. This metaphor was typically used in the Greco-Roman world to support the prevailing hierarchy, but Paul uses it to reverse that hierarchy. Those members of the body/ community of apparent lesser honor and value (in this context, a reference with those to mundane spiritual gifts) are actually, by God’s arrangement, of greater honor and status” (ibid., pp. 563-4).

In other words, traditional (patriarchal) hierarchy no longer prevails. Paul, by a gift of grace, offers us a glimpse of truly *egalitarian* fellowship and community. “The argument,” as another commentator puts it, “opposes the ‘honor’ values of hierarchical aristocratic Greek and imperial Roman culture, insisting on the solidarity of the interdependent and equally valued members” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 285).

What an incredible example of God’s upside-down kingdom, one where nobody looks down on anybody else since all are one in the body of Christ (see Galatians 3:29).

Conclusion

This morning each of you is called, called to ponder the ways you can live out your vocation by serving others in need generally as well as through our ministry at Queen Anne Lutheran. You can do it in a variety of ways, depending on your talents and interests. One of our members, for example, sends out cards to our visitors. Another member wrote a note for me to give to the family of long-time member Tim Moody who passed away earlier this week. I wish she could have seen how her words made a difference when I read them to Tim, his wife Sherry, and their family.

Others continue to serve faithfully on our council, count the offerings after services, and perform audits, all of which reflect talents God has bestowed on *them* for the sake of building up *us*.

Beyond the church walls, finally, many people live out their vocation by serving others, which brings me back to the dental assistant.

When I asked her why she does what she does, the response was simple. “I like to help people,” she said, “and I’m pretty good at what I do.” I thank God for that! And there you have it: a vocation, a life with purpose, a better community, and yes, better teeth for everyone!

And all God’s people said, Amen.