

Sermon for January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
Text: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

First, some light humor:

How many **Charismatics** does it take to change a light bulb?

Five. One to change the bulb and four to bind the spirit of darkness in the room.

How many **Calvinists** does it take to change a light bulb?

None. God has predestined when the lights will be on.

How many **liberals** does it take to change a light bulb?

At least ten, as they need to hold a debate on whether or not the light bulb exists. Even if they can agree upon the existence of the light bulb, they still may not change it to keep from alienating those who might use other forms of light.

How many **Unitarians** does it take to change a light bulb?

We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey, you have found that a light bulb works for you, that is fine. You are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your personal relationship to your light bulb and present it next month at our annual light bulb Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, three-way, long-lived, and tinted; all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence through Jesus Christ.

How many **Anglicans** does it take to change a light bulb?

Ten. One to call the electrician, one to pour the Scotch, and eight to say how much they liked the old one better.

As Christians, different groups have always approached the expression of their faith in different ways. This phenomenon is not a recent one but rather one that has been around since the inception of the Church. Although in many respects this diversity is a blessing to the Church, there must also be boundaries to this diversity. Paul himself understood these limits even in the First Century Church, and he speaks to those boundaries in this morning's reading regarding spiritual gifts. One of the problems that Paul was facing in Corinth was that worship had become a bit too "ecstatic." These highly emotional practices in worship were carryovers from certain pagan cults that relied on a purely emotional experience for its participants. Many Christians in Corinth began to believe that this ecstasy was proof that a person was led by the Holy Spirit. Paul makes it clear that the presence of the Holy Spirit is demonstrated in a person's life not by an emotional experience but rather by confession of Jesus as Lord. Furthermore, the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not signs of the Spirit's presence but rather the fruit of it.

Unfortunately, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians often fall into the same trap as 1<sup>st</sup> Century ones did. Many people today still believe that the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life can only be proven by things like speaking in tongues, raising one's hands

in worship, or being “slain in the Spirit.” In response to such behavior, many other Christians tend to discount the work of the Holy Spirit and reject spiritual gifts all together. As Anglicans, we must, as always, take a balanced approach. This morning we will look at how we are to understand spiritual gifts and how they are to be used.

The first thing we need to understand about spiritual gifts is that they are not to be used as a litmus test for who is a “real” Christian. When I was a kid, my brother and I got a chemistry set. One of the things it came with was litmus paper. I can remember running around the house trying to find all kinds of different substances to test and see which one was an acid and which one was a base. It was a very objective test. Either a substance was one thing or it was the other. There was no in between. For some Christians, speaking in tongues has become a similar test. If you do it, then the Holy Spirit dwells within you. If you don’t, well, hopefully you enjoy the heat. Paul is clear that this type of perspective can become an idol for us. People begin to worship the experience rather than the one to whom it points. Turning these experiences into the test of true faith also leads to pride and manipulation; two things which we can all agree are not aspects of the Kingdom of God. Secondly, it is important to note that Paul does not offer an all inclusive list of spiritual gifts here. Rather, he is listing some examples of spiritual gifts. Paul gives us other lists elsewhere, and again it is important to understand that these lists don’t even begin to exhaust the potential for the Holy Spirit’s gifts to us.

The reason why we cannot confine spiritual gifts to definitive lists is because these gifts are defined not so much by what they are but rather by how they are used. Paul says, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” The true definition of a spiritual gift is one that benefits not simply the individual, but rather the church. For example, a person who is a gifted musician has a definite talent. When they play in their basements or at bars, that gift remains nothing more than a talent. However, when that gift is used to benefit the church as, for example part of the choir, for evangelism, or for some other ministry, it becomes a spiritual gift. The same can be said for any number of talents. Dave Parris is one of the smartest guys I know and an exceptional teacher. He certainly has what it takes to be a history or English professor at a large university. By using his gift for teaching in the church and in a seminary, Dr. Parris is using his spiritual gift to benefit the Church. When Jack Gloriod uses his vast knowledge of business to serve on our Vestry and help the church be a successful corporation, he is using his spiritual gifts. We are all called to use the talents and skills that God has given us not just for our own benefit, but for the benefit of the whole. How are you using your spiritual gifts for the common good? What more might you be able to do that you are not already doing?

Another potential pitfall with respect to spiritual gifts is jealousy. Let’s face it, some gifts seem a bit more glamorous than others. People certainly take more notice of a person who can play the piano brilliantly than they do of a person who can make sure the financial books are balanced. However, Paul is very clear that God gives spiritual gifts “to each one individually as he wills.” In other words, they are given according to the need of the community rather than the desire of the individual. Just because you enjoy something does not necessarily mean it is a spiritual gift. This past week I have been watching the opening auditions for American Idol. Thousands of people come to these auditions because they love music and want nothing more than to make it a

career. Unfortunately, most of them simply don't have the skill and talent to be a professional musician, much less a pop star. The same might be said of spiritual gifts. I may really have a desire to be a parish administrator, but if I am unorganized and undisciplined then I will actually do more to harm the church than help it. The question we must always ask when discerning our spiritual gifts is not necessarily, "What would I like to do?" but rather, "What do I do well?" Although some gifts might be more exciting than others, they are all equally important. The sermons on Sunday morning wouldn't be nearly as good if we didn't have Chuck and Dareleen attending to the business needs of the parish. The sounds of the choir wouldn't be quite as inspiring if the altar linens were wrinkled and uneven. All parts work together for one common purpose, which is the glory of God. As Paul says, "There are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone." We must always seek to use the gifts God has given us not for our own glory, but for his glory.

As Anglicans, there is really no reason for us to be afraid of spiritual gifts. They are a necessary part of the church and many of you are already using your spiritual gifts right here at St. George's. We simply need to avoid the temptation to misuse the gifts God has given us. To prevent this from happening, we simply need to ask ourselves, "Is this a gift that I have been given, and am I using it for the common good." After all, it is not simply about the gifts that we share, but also about the fruit that they bear.