

Romans 12:1-8
Through us for the world.

Ruskin Falls, October 21, 2018
Pulaski Heights Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday after Pentecost

TEXT (English translation: NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

(1)

Let's begin at the end of this passage by the apostle Paul, where he lists several spiritual gifts that we should expect to find among Christians. Not that any one of us must or will exemplify all of the gifts in an outstanding way. What we Christians are gifted individually to do will vary from person to person. No one of us has all the spiritual gifts, not even we ordained ministers.

It is true that, as theologian David Bartlett has noted, Christians often do fall into presuming an actually pretentious distinction between ministers and other Christians: "We pretend that there are super Christians (often called clergy) and regular Christians" (generally called laity), as though clergy have been gifted with more spiritual authority than have others (*Romans*, WJK Press, 1995, p.114). In this respect it is especially clergypersons who today most need to be reminded of Paul's warning "not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think."

Sadly, those looked to as clergy often assume so much authority, that they start thinking God has given them more gifted access to God's will than others have. We often forget that "clergy" and "laity" are supposed to work *together* as *seekers* of God's will for the church and for our lives. As Bartlett rightly notes, even Paul "would not have expected any one Christian to take on as much power as some clergypeople [today] possess. Paul's own authority was always held in mutuality, and the church was an extension of Christ's will, not an extension of the pastor's" (p.113). The gifts of the Spirit are not gifts of personal authority and power over others. Rather, any particular individual's spiritual gifts are always and only for the sake of *working and sharing together as sisters and brothers* in the building up of the church as a whole.

Paul offers differing lists of spiritual gifts in various places in his letters. Let's take a brief look at the list he offers us here in *Romans*.

The list opens with the gift for *prophecy*. Often, prophecy is associated with predicting future events. Yet, in Paul's churches, prophecy actually meant the ability to interpret scripture in the light of the gospel of Jesus and apply its message to current situations. It meant discerning God's will *for the present* by letting the gospel open us to what our current situation calls for.

The second gift Paul mentions here is the gift for *ministry*. Paul, of course, wrote in Greek, and the Greek word he uses here is: διακονία, or “diaconate.” He means not a gift specifically for preaching but a gift for service as a *deacon*, which is to say: a gift for reaching out on behalf of the church to the poor and the needy, the sick and the distressed, those who are downcast, and those who’ve been shunned for some reason and turned into outcasts.

The third gift mentioned here is the gift for *teaching*, the gift for guiding the faith of individual Christians toward and into theologically deeper and broader knowledge and understanding.

The fourth gift is the gift for *exhortation*. The Greek word here is παρακλήσει, which has to do with responding to people’s situations and needs with fitting expressions of consolation, encouragement, and/or admonition. It is the gift for sensing when and how to urge people toward certain actions through appropriate counsel and advice.

The fifth gift is the gift for plain, simple, outright *generosity* in our giving to the church.

The sixth gift is, as we read in English, the gift for *diligence in leadership*. Note well, however, that the Greek that here has been translated as “leaders” is ὁ προϊτάμενος, a word that, in Paul’s day, ordinarily referred to “administrators.” Paul seems to have in mind persons with *administrative skills* that are valuable to the church, and the conscientious use of those skills.

And the final gift mentioned here is the gift for extending *compassionate* care to others without discouragement, burnout, or resentment, but always with a serene and hope-filled *cheerfulness*.

(2)

This morning I want to linger a little longer on the fifth of the spiritual gifts Paul lists here, namely, the gift of *the ability to give to the church with generosity*.

Some people, in their giving to the church, have a greater or, at any rate, a more automatic, capacity for generosity than others of us have. At pledge time, for example, when we are pondering how much we should be able to contribute to the work of the church in the year ahead, many of us wrestle with feelings of reluctance. We wonder if maybe we’re being tempted to give more than we really need to, and we work out good justifications for giving a little less. Yet there are some who seem really not to know this feeling of reluctance; they give generously and with a more natural cheerfulness than do the rest of us. The same thing applies to the giving of time and talents. While many of us have a tendency to pour time and talent only a bit begrudgingly into the work of the church, there are others who give – over and over, time and again, often only inconspicuously and behind the scenes – with utterly glad and almost angelic generosity of spirit.

I emphasize the gift of generosity this morning, because tomorrow our Accounting and Budget Committee will be sending out pledge letters asking everyone to consider, between now and November 4, pledging to give a certain amount of money to the work of our church during the calendar year, 2019. Member generosity (not only at pledge time, but particularly at pledge time!) is vital to the work of the church; and yet, generosity often gets overlooked as a spiritual gift. When we think of someone “filled with the Spirit,” we more likely think of charismatic preachers, teachers, healers, and other leaders. The truth, however, is this: no matter how quiet and unassuming and inconspicuous they might be, cheerfully generous givers are as close to and are as filled with the Holy Spirit, as is the most charismatic of preachers, or the

most astounding of miracle workers. What is more, the church can flourish even in the absence of miracle workers or other such charismatic figures. But what the church has to have in every age is generous givers. The church needs them both for the generosity that is within them, and for the generosity that they inspire in the rest of us.

(3)

As already mentioned, pledge letters are going out tomorrow. A pledge is your assurance to the church that you will contribute at least a certain specified amount of money to its work during the calendar year ahead. Knowing the total amount pledged to the church for next year helps our session allocate material resources more wisely and more responsibly than it otherwise could. Pledging also is a spiritual exercise. It invites us very deliberately to reflect on our own financial priorities. It challenges us to contemplate the role that money plays in our life. It reminds us to ponder the aims and needs of the church, and to pray over our personal commitment to the church's mission in the world.

You may have good reason to give to the church otherwise than by pledging. We welcome you to give in whatever way gratitude and joy in the Spirit might move you to give. Right now we're simply asking you to reflect on the kind of financial support you should be in position to offer the church in 2019, and to give prayerful thought to participating in the practice of pledging.

Toward that end, I want to say two things about the giving of money to the work of the church.

The first thing I want to say is this: Some people are not in position to commit much money to the church and still be able to pay *even modestly* for such things as groceries, rent, utilities, clothing, and their children's schooling. The *little* that some people give, represents a *greater* proportion of their resources than does the *larger* amount of money that some financially better-off church-goers might give. And, as Jesus himself reminded disciples, we who give out of our abundance of resources, often stand to learn some serious lessons from those who don't have an abundance from which to give, and yet who nevertheless give boldly.

The second thing I want to say is this: In deciding how much to give to the work of the church, take it to the Lord in *prayer*, then give what you can give *cheerfully*, and *grow* from there.

I know people whose financial circumstances dictate that their cheerful giving needs to *vary* from week to week or from month to month. I know others who cheerfully give a *fixed amount* each week or each month, generally a certain *percentage* of their income – some cheerfully calculating their giving on the basis of *gross* income, others on the basis of *net* income.

I know people who figure a certain percentage of their income (be it gross or net) for *total* giving to charity, including to the church. I know others who make, for example, a *10% tithe* to the church, and then make charitable contributions to other organizations *on top of* that.

I know that some people figure on giving 1% of their income to the church; I know that some people figure 3%, 5%, 10%, 15%, or more. I even know of one person who detests the church yet loves quoting Jesus regarding compassionately giving to the poor, and who himself gives 20% of his income each year to organizations that extend health care, shelter, food, and education to the poor and needy in this country and around the world.

I also know that each person's and each family's financial situation is unique to them. The

financial responsibilities that I have right now regarding myself, my family, and other relatives and friends, will be different from the financial responsibilities that you have right now for yourself, your family, and other relatives and friends. And each of us must come to our own prayerful conclusions about the relationship between, on the one hand, commitments to care for ourselves and our families and friends, and, on the other, the commitments that we can and should be making to the work of the church.

That said, I'll still add this: those of us who are *not* poor – in particular, those of us who, as Jesus put it, give from our *abundance* – will seldom be caught giving *more* to the church than we should! Not all but likely most of us who give from our abundance, tend to leave ourselves room to *grow* in *how* and in *how much* we give to the church, as well as in how and how much we give to charitable causes in general. All I am asking right now is that we all give prayerful thought to what we should be in position to give to the work of the church.

(4)

There is one thing more I want to say this morning regarding the passage we're listening to today from Paul's letter to the Romans. It has to do with his notion of *spiritual worship*.

Paul refers to "spiritual worship" as meaning "presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice to God." We need to be careful not to let that expression confuse us. Because we tend to consider body and spirit to be such opposites, Paul's expression might sound as if he were saying: Sacrifice your body for the sake of your spirit. Or: To worship God truly, you must sacrifice your bodily desires for the sake of spiritual ones. But that isn't what Paul is saying here. Paul is saying that, in the end, true worship is a matter of *the whole of Christian life*. It isn't something that happens only Sundays in the sanctuary. And it doesn't mean cutting ourselves off from the material world. Rather, it means: letting what happens in worship here in the sanctuary manifest itself in daily life amidst all the worldly, earthy, material aspects of our being. It means worshiping God with the whole of our life – body and soul together. It means letting what happens in our time of worship here *in* this sanctuary transform the lives we lead *outside* this sanctuary, enabling us, better and better, to lead our worldly lives in keeping with God's will.

You see, the work of our congregation turns on letting the redeeming love that we have met in Jesus Christ work *through us* in the *world*. In worship we turn toward God in gratitude for God's love, humbly yet boldly confident in God to use our service of worship to fit us with wisdom and courage for what is ours to do in the world we then go out into. And, of course, that "fitting" can happen through a variety of *styles* of worship. The style of worship we follow here at Pulaski Heights Presbyterian is always open to experimentation and reform. I would characterize our usual style as reverent, emotionally disciplined, respectful of divine mystery, mindful of the great complexity of human life, and focused on listening for God's word and enjoying the beauty of God's goodness through preaching, sacrament, prayerful concern, music, and the simple splendor of our sanctuary – all intended to help us leave here knowing ourselves and others welcomed by God as forgiven sinners, with a cheerful mind for what is truly important and lasting in life, and rejoicing in the knowledge that the Spirit is at work in and through us to bring out in each one of us what is truly best about us for the sake of all the world. And *that*, I believe, is *spiritual worship* in Paul's sense. It may not look *wildly* or even *charismatically* spiritual. But then, neither do the gifts of the Spirit that are so important to Paul. In the end, they all boil down to just this: letting Christ use the church to make the world a better, more godly, place.

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