

Second Sunday after the Epiphany • January 20, 2013

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

“Who Is My Neighbor?: Gifts in the Serving Community – Part I”

Christmas came along almost one month ago. If you received gifts back on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, which of those presents leap to mind several weeks later? I'm guessing that you could name at least a couple of them right off the top of your head, like ones that you'd wished for or others that were particularly significant. My wife surprised me with the gift of the Kinect accessory for our Xbox console. It's a sensor that lets the system “see” and hear the real world. Instead of using a handheld controller to play games or interact with the Xbox, you're able to do so through voice and movement. If you're watching a movie and want to get up and get some popcorn from the kitchen, for example, you need only say “Pause” to freeze the action. And while that's pretty convenient, the Kinect's most impressive feature is how it lets you use motion to control what it's putting up on the screen. When you play a game, you might chop boards just by slicing your hand through the air or look through your racecar's rearview mirror by turning your head to one side. You can even get a Nike fitness program which gives you a training regimen and corrects your technique as you exercise, like a virtual personal trainer. The Kinect is made for action. (That motion-based interaction happens to be what my wife enjoys most as she watches me jumping and waving my arms around in front of the Kinect.) It's been a great gift, one that I'm using on a regular basis. Some of the best presents are like that. They're meant to be put to use; they're not just for sitting on a shelf or stuffing in a closet. These are gifts given for you to enjoy in an active way from day to day.

We've moved on from the Christmas season into this season of Epiphany. Here at St. John's, we're once again considering what it means to live as God's people through “Being SJLC: Serving Jesus + Living in Community.” If you were here with us last weekend, you heard how God brings us into community through His gift of Holy Baptism – not just any community, but a serving community. This year, our Being SJLC emphasis puts focus on this question of “Who is my neighbor?” It's a great question, one that you and I should bear in mind in every season, especially as people who are part of this servant community through God's grace.

God's grace is at the center of our Epistle text today. The Christians of Corinth had a number of questions they'd hoped the apostle Paul might address. His response in 1 Corinthians indicates that the believers there were having a particular problem around the topic of spiritual gifts. Using St. Paul's reply as our guide, let's look at the Who, What, When, Where, and Why of this topic of gifts in the Corinthians' community – and ours, as well.

Before we consider “who,” you should know “what” this is all about. It seems that some in the congregation there in Corinth held that certain gifts were more significant than others, and those who held such gifts were being given greater regard. Problem is, the people of that community were missing the point of the gifts, using them as grounds for self-glorification instead of putting them to the use for which they'd been given. When you hear the phrase “spiritual gifts,” what comes to mind? Something obviously extraordinary, like speaking in tongues, when someone would talk in a language that they had never learned? That's what was going on amongst the believers there. They were focusing in on the gift itself, rather than the purpose for which it had been given. In his response to the Corinthian Christians, Paul calls these things “gifts of grace.” That's the more literal translation for what we usually see in English as “spiritual gifts.” “Gifts of grace” are the what: gifts that come to the community not because it deserves them, but because out of His love their Giver wants the recipients to have these gifts and to put them to use. Making a list of some such gifts of grace – and leaving the gift of tongues for the very last – Paul emphasizes that none is greater than the others; accordingly, any believer who would use it as a justification for putting himself before others is failing to recognize Who has given the gift and who should benefit from it. God gave the Church in Corinth a rich variety of gifts of grace, and He continues to do so today.

As you heard, every gift of grace comes from God. The Holy Spirit is often recognized as the One who delivers the gifts, yet as Paul points out, they all come from the Spirit, our Lord Jesus, and God the Father working in unity. The gifts of grace come from God and they go to His people. That was the case in Corinth two thousand years ago, and so it is in our community today. You are gifted. You are who God has called into community to receive and use His gifts of grace. You probably don't bear a flashy gift like speaking in languages that you don't know – indeed, some of the gifts that Paul lists might not be active in our world today. Even so, God is continually giving gifts of grace to you and through you. Gifts of grace are meant to be shared. Who is your neighbor? Look at the people in the pew around you. All too often, you and I forget that we are a part of a community in this congregation, thinking mainly of our personal needs and desires. You might not put yourself ahead of your fellow believers like the Corinthians did, but are you using the gifts of grace that God gives to serve the people around you? They're who the Spirit has put right beside you in our life together. After the service today, if you see someone here who you do not know, introduce yourself and learn their name. Get to know the people who are here with you today. They are your neighbor, and you are theirs.

So when should you use God's gifts of grace? Where are they to be found? These questions go together, as God gives His gifts for use in particular times and places. Gifts of grace are given – and withdrawn – as the Spirit moves. They shouldn't be viewed as permanent attributes that belong to a believer for all time; rather, these gifts are active

allocations that come through your connection with God through faith. When the need for service comes before God's people, He provides for the need to be met. When God calls you into the serving community that is His Church through Baptism, He will continually equip you for service. God's gifts are for all His people, not just some elite group of pastors or church workers or congregational leadership. Each of us will face different opportunities through our interactions with others in our community in the Church and in our lives in the rest of the world. You need but keep your eyes and ears open to see and hear when and where God's gifts of grace might be used. Again, after the service when you're talking to someone you might not have known before, or even if you know everyone around you, ask at least one person here for one concern about which you can pray for them. The place is here. The time is now. You can be a blessing in service to your community here as well as in your life outside the congregation.

The "why" of it all for both the believers in Corinth and for us goes back to God's grace, too. As Paul writes, the gifts that the Spirit brings to equip His people are all meant for the common good. Rather than being perks or privileges that would glorify their bearers above fellow believers, God's gifts of grace work together to promote unity in the serving community of the Church. Here, we participate in the greatest gift of grace as we share the good news of new life in Jesus. God's Son did not glorify himself; he set his glory aside to be born, to live, and to die to make our community with God possible. In Jesus and in the gifts of grace that he makes possible, we see the practical nature of God's love. Your gifts from God, like those of the Corinthians, are meant to support and connect you and your fellow believers in a world that is constantly at work to tear down and break apart. As you pray for and work to serve your neighbor, you are acting as the hands of Christ in their life. Like the Kinect, God's gifts of grace are meant for action. You are equipped as an agent of our Lord's love. Unlike that fancy bit of technology, however, you are not an accessory but an integral part of a serving community.

A month past Christmas, what gifts are you still putting to regular use? In this season of Epiphany – and all the seasons to follow – know that God's gifts of grace keep coming. He gives them for you.

**Amen.**