

“ME AND MY DRUM”
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I Corinthians 12:1-11

Matthew 4:18-22

Every year, usually sometime during the summer, every United Methodist pastor, has a meeting with their District Superintendent. It’s called a supervisory meeting. And every year, in preparation for that meeting, we have to fill out a form about ourselves and our ministries. And every year, one of the questions on that form almost stops me in my tracks. And the question is this: what are your gifts?

I’m never quite sure how to answer that question and what to write down. And you know what? I suspect that many of you might have had that same experience this week when you went to fill out the talent/service pledge sheet that was included in last week’s bulletin to be returned this week. I’ll bet some of you had trouble answering that question too, huh?

I think we’re all a little like “The Little Drummer Boy” in that classic Christmas song – when, invited to come before the newborn king to honor him with gifts, he replies, “I have no gift to bring,” at first.

I don’t know what it is about us thinking about and naming our gifts and giftedness. Maybe we truly don’t think we have any special gifts – anything out of the ordinary. Or maybe it embarrasses us to name them, it might seem like we’re boasting or something, or thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought.

But the fact of the matter is that we all **are** gifted – every single one of us. God has uniquely created us and given each of us gifts. Look at the lesson from I Corinthians that Dick read – some of them were listed there. There are more listed elsewhere in the New Testament, and all you have to do is start reading the stories throughout scripture, and you’ll begin to identify the gifts with which people have been endowed by God.

David – courage; Solomon – wisdom; Ruth – loyalty; Joseph – carpentry; Peter – preaching . . . well, the list goes on and on. Every person – everyone has been given gifts, and not just for ourselves, but, as the scripture this morning said, “for the common good.”

So, this morning, for a few moments, I want each of us to think about the gifts we have been given, and how we can use them for the common good.

The first step, then, is identifying your gifts. Now, I know that deep down in your heart you know what some of your gifts are. But if you're struggling to figure them out, ask the people in your life to help you. They see your gifts in you, even if you don't.

You know, whenever I lead Disciple Bible study, and I've probably led it a dozen times, I'm always amazed, because in one of the last sessions, group members identify the gifts they see in one another – and every time, they are spot on. It's amazing what your family and friends can see in you, that maybe you can't see in yourself. So, be courageous and ask them. Say, "if someone asked you what gifts I have, what would you say?" You might be surprised, and you'll surely be enlightened. Your gifts sometimes shine through whether you name them or not, whether you're even aware of them or not.

There are also such things as gifts inventories that you can take, and actually, the Stewardship Committee is going to be offering that, probably next year. It will help you identify some of the gifts God has given you and how you can use them.

And let me say one more thing about identifying your gifts. Don't make it harder than it is. We tend to look at those so called "big gifts" – some of which were listed in the I Corinthians lesson – and think, "well, I don't have any of those." Maybe you don't. But are you good at organizing things? That's a gift. Do you send cards or write notes to people on special occasions or when they're hurting? That's a gift. Do you knit, or do carpentry, or sing, or teach? All gifts.

Don't make identifying your gifts harder than it is. What makes you you? Those are your gifts.

I read this week about a seminary student who, one rainy night, was returning to the dorm after classes. He was going up the stairwell to his room when he encountered one of his theology professors. He was very surprised to see the professor in the dorm, especially that late at night, and he was even more surprised to see him carrying several bags of groceries. The student offered to help him carry the groceries and along the way, he heard the story – that a wife of one of the students was battling cancer, and this professor had visited with them and prayed with them and asked if they needed anything – that he wanted to help in any way he could. And so, every week, when he finished teaching, he would go out and get this young couple their groceries for the week. No fanfare, no attention, he just did it. And you know what this seminary student said about this? He said, "Nothing I learned from him in the courses he taught had as much personal impact on me as finding him in that staircase on a cold, rainy night." (Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Living*, "Loving and Serving Others," p. 104).

That professor had the gift of compassion – and so many others – but, do you see what I mean, your gifts don't have to be world-changing, they just are what they are – but oh, what you and God can do with them.

Which brings me to my second point about your gifts – once you identify them, use them. Figure out where and how to use them. Not sure how? Well, listen to these wise words from theologian Frederick Buechner, who invites you to use your gifts in “the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.” (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, p. 119)

Using your gifts should be marked by joy and deep gladness. So ask yourself – what makes you happy? When are you happiest, and what gift are you using when you are happiest? Is it working with your hands, it is cooking for someone, is it teaching? When are you happiest?

Once you've figured that out, then think about a need that gift can fill – a hunger that can fill. If cooking makes you happy, might you help out with meals for the Rotating Homeless Shelter or the Community Kitchen? If it's carpentry, how about helping build a ramp with Christmas in April? If teaching others brings you joy, there are a million different ways to do that – in the church and in the world? If writing makes you happy, Lord knows so many need to hear a good and friendly word from someone else.

Well, you get the picture – identify some of your gifts by thinking about what makes you happy, what brings you joy – and then seek to meet a need with that gift.

When I was preparing to write this sermon, I couldn't help but think of how that process helped some great things happen through this church. For instance, the Knights in Shining Armor in our parking lot. Those guys are happy guys, aren't they? And they seem most happy when they're greeting you, and helping you out of your cars and into the building, or holding an umbrella to shield you from rain. Do you know when that ministry started? When our parking lot was about to be torn up for construction, we were concerned that people would struggle and need help wading through the mud and detours and such. So we started this group – it was indeed where the deep gladness of these men met a deep hunger that we had – a need that we had – and look how much that ministry means to this church! It's amazing – one new member actually said they were the reason she joined this church!

There are no little gifts, my friends. Figure out what your gifts are, and then find a way to use them. Keep your eyes open – because God will always provide opportunities.

The final thing I want to say is that, in the end, the choice is up to you. You can use the gifts God has given you, or you can choose not to. But oh, how I hope you will use them, for the world needs what you have to give.

So I want to close with a story that I think will give you a lot to think about. It's Helen's story. Helen was a housekeeper, who one day, just like any other day, she walked up the driveway to her employer's house, and looked up to see him sitting in the window in his wheelchair, just staring out at her.

She walked into the house, and greeted him, but there was no reply. That happened a lot since the accident when he was paralyzed from the chest down and confined to his electronic wheelchair. But she went on and began to do her housework, and after a while, she decided to turn on some music to make the day go better. She went to the radio, fiddled around with the dial, and finally found some loud, polka music and thought – this will get me going – and so it did. But all of a sudden there was a scream from the other room – her employer, yelling “Turn that blasted stuff off!”

Well, so shaken was she from his yelling, that she ran over to the radio, frantically fiddled with the dials, and in her panic, accidentally broke the dial, so now it was stuck in the on position and the polka music was still blaring. She stood stock still, and then suddenly, just burst out laughing at the absurdity of it all. And miraculously, so did Charles, her employer. It started with a chuckle, and turned into a great big belly laugh.

After a second or so, he apologized to her for being gruff, and then said, “it's just that I can't do anything anymore since the accident,” and tears rolled down his face. Helen took his hand, and then reached into her pocket and took out a little, tiny frame. She asked him to look at it and tell her what he saw.

“Nothing,” he said. “It's just a frame around a solid white picture.”

Helen replied, “Oh no. It's snow, or a fluffy cotton ball, or a white sheet hanging on the line to dry.” She continued: “That picture is like one's life. Either it can remain a blank canvas or we can make something beautiful and meaningful out of it. The choice is ours!”

“No,” Charles came back. “My choice was taken away from me.”

Helen thought for a moment and said, “You used to like to dance, didn't you?” He nodded yes. “Well, you can still dance. Use those buttons on that wheelchair – get it moving – go ahead, polka.”

And tentatively, at first, he began to move the chair back and forth and side to side, and then he got a little wild, and did a complete circle to the music, and soon he had a great, huge smile on his face!

After he stopped, Helen said, “And didn’t you used to like helping children? Well, you know what – they’re looking for a storyteller for the Children’s Room at the library right now. Why don’t you do that?”

Charles looked at Helen and said, “How’d you get so wise?”

Quietly she rolled up her sleeve, and on her arm had been tattooed numbers – she had been in a concentration camp as a child. She told him how she had lost all of her family – all of them – and she was all alone and totally despondent. “Like you,” she said to Charles, “I felt like I had everything important taken away from me, and my future seemed bleak.” But a lovely couple adopted her, and she grew to love them dearly. They helped her to see that she was special, and that God gave everyone special gifts that they needed to discover and use to help others.

When she was getting ready to go off to college, they gave her that tiny frame with the white picture in it and said that what it would reflect would be up to her.
(On-line, sermonillustrator.org, Melanie Schurr)

My friends, in the end, it is up to us. We make the choice. We can choose to use the gifts God has uniquely given to us or we can choose not to. Like he asked the disciples, so Christ asks us to use them to help others.

Will you? I hope you will. I hope you found some things on that pledge sheet that brought you joy and that you’ll try. I guarantee you that what you do will make a difference – not only in the lives of those you help, but in your own life.

You know, one day a woman had just come from visiting in a local nursing home, when a friend asked her where she’d been. You know what she replied? “I’ve been to a gift exchange. I give them my time, and they teach me about life.”

I couldn’t put it any better. Use the gifts God has given you, and I guarantee you it will be a gift exchange – you’ll receive as much as you get – and in the process, you’ll draw ever closer to the giver Himself – Almighty God. May it be so.

Amen.