

GIVEN TO EACH FOR THE GOOD OF ALL

Acts 2:1-21
1 Corinthians 12:3-13

David B. Keller
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TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12:7 "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."
PURPOSE: To celebrate the gifting of the Spirit that equips and empowers us to do the work to which God is calling us in what may seem like a too complex world.

You thought you were just coming to a worship service this morning. Or maybe, you thought you were coming to an event that would contribute to your honoring of your mother today. But, like a boat that's heading out to the fishing banks without checking the weather, we all have inadvertently entered a perfect storm of four different issues that need our attention, all in one service. It's a big job, but I'll see if I can get us through it in time for our lunch reservations.

For sure, it is Mother's Day, which is not just another Hallmark event, but truly a day that carries a wide range of emotions. Mothers are bedrock. Lots of us have the wonderful experience of our mothers' extraordinary love and patience carrying us through the challenges and changes of our lives. It's a very good thing that we set aside a day to appreciate our mothers in a special way. But some relationships between mothers and children can be difficult, even harmful. And then, there's people who want to be mothers, but can't, and mothers who have lost their children to tragedy or crime or addiction. And then, there's people who have broken their mothers' hearts. On any given Mothers' Day, in any church, all those possibilities are likely to be present. The church does well to lift all these mother-child relationships up to God.

Next, today is Pentecost, one of the great big holy days of the church. Pentecost is the day we celebrate the birth of the church. It recalls the day that the first disciples received the Holy Spirit, and, through its power, began to boldly preach the good news of Jesus, to heal in his name, and to become a community that still shares his life. A Pentecost worship service ought to be reconnecting us with that Holy Spirit power, and get flames of fire dancing on our heads that inspire us to get out and share the good news in word and deed.

Pentecost is a celebration for the whole Christian Church. But in this local church, this also is the day when we install those whom we have elected to lead this church into their various position of leadership. Because we elected these people at our annual meeting last Sunday, we need to install them in their positions today. In that service of installation, we affirm a covenant involving our leaders, the congregation at large, and God. We remember that the work we do together is really

God's work. We recognize that the service we give in the church depends on our connection to God through prayerful discerning of God's will for this church. If we wanted, we could build a whole worship service around the cultivating of Spirit-filled leadership for Christ's Church.

But then, we are coming together in worship a week after a cyclone devastated a country that is regarded as one of the world's most troublesome places. The toll of death and destruction in Myanmar probably will not ever be fully calculated, but let's just say we are dealing with disaster larger than Katrina in a country whose leadership isn't able to deal with the problems and isn't willing to openly accept assistance from others, especially from countries like ours, who have rightly denounced their abuse of human rights.

So there's our perfect storm: a convergence of family relationships, the Spirit's calling the Church to life, our own local commissioning of our leaders for service among us, and an overwhelming disaster that demands a response from Christ's followers. Maybe, instead of the storm metaphor, we could picture ourselves playing that old game called Twister: right hand on Mother's Day, left foot on Myanmar, left hand on installation of officers, right foot on Pentecost.

I'll bet you are almost as happy as I am that, among the Bible passages appointed for the celebration of Pentecost, there is one that is custom-designed to help us navigate the waters we are in. It's the passage from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, in which he reminds that church, and the whole Church, that "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone." (1 Corinthians 12:4-6) Perhaps, if Paul were writing to our church on this day, he might say, there are lots of things you need to deal with, but there is one holy power energizing your efforts and giving you what you need to meet the challenges you are facing.

This I believe: not just on a Mother's Day, Pentecost, Installation, Disaster Response Sunday, but on any day the church gathers to be the church of Jesus Christ, the way we are together will necessarily include personal and family issues, connections to the great tradition of the church, considerations regarding our local organization for ministry, and concerns for the world, especially for those who suffer. Paul's insight turns what may feel like us trying to manage disparate and conflicting demands into a powerful converging of variously gifted people working toward a common goal. "To each," he says, and that really means to each, not only to some,

but to every person who participates in the community of faith, “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” That is exactly what happens in Christ’s church day after day and week after week. I’ll prove it, right here in the Twister game we are playing this morning.

A person took it upon herself three weeks ago, without being recruited, to make sure that mothers were honored in our worship today. That honoring will close our service, and will make this a most special Mother’s Day.

A group of people contacted the people whom we elected to positions of leadership in this church, and encouraged them to be present for their installation this morning.

Our Mission Board has a long tradition of connecting a special appeal called Blanket Sunday to Mother’s Day. Blanket Sunday funds the disaster relief work of Church World Service, which is the agency that we would use anyway to address the disaster in Myanmar. Church World Service is already working with other non-governmental agencies and with faith partners in Myanmar to bring early relief to disaster victims. They know how to work around the barriers the government is insanely maintaining because they are always working to build relationships with helping groups. When a disaster strikes, they use those relationships to get help to those groups, rather than setting up their own separate relief efforts. Any of us can add to the gifts that remember and honor our mothers by placing a contribution in the envelope included in your bulletin.

And Pentecost? Our choirs have been rehearsing Pentecost music for the past month. Besides, we, like those followers who felt the rush of a mighty wind on the first Pentecost, have no control over how the Spirit might take hold of our life together and give us the gifts we need to do the work God needs for us to do. Our task is simply to be open to receiving the Spirit, and responsive to its guidance and power as we seek to be Christ’s faithful church.

If the coming together of the disparate efforts of the people who were each taking care of some aspects of us being the church is not a testimony to the Spirit at work among us, I don’t know what would count.

One of the great tasks of the Church in any generation, and certainly in our frazzled times, is to cultivate belief that what Paul told the Corinthians remains true for us, that the Spirit really does give gifts to each person, and that all those gifts have

the purpose of serving the good of all of us together. It is way too easy these days, and in churches like ours, to conclude that the Spirit is rather stingy with regard to the giving of gifts. Way too often, we don't even think about spiritual gifts. We're relieved if folks are willing to serve. But here is the spiritual reality that continues in our life together: to *each one*, to every single person who is part of our life together, the Spirit has bestowed some gift that we all need.

Wow. No exceptions. No spectators. No formerly gifted people whom the Spirit has un-gifted. Even the person who is just beginning to find her place in a church brings gifts, most likely unrecognized but nonetheless valuable, that are needed for the common good, for the church to be the Body of Christ in the world.

The Spirit gives to some of us gifts that demonstrate concern for the health of our family relationships. The Spirit gives to others of us gifts that help us organize our institutional life. The Spirit gives yet to others of us gifts that prophetically urge us to look beyond ourselves and see the needs of the world's vulnerable people. And to yet others, the Spirit gives gifts that enable us all to come together as a community called to worship and glorify God.

In churches like ours, it can seem, all too often, that we are a small boat in a big storm, or someone contorted in a programmatic Twister game, or a group of people madly trying to keep way too many plates spinning. But take the Spirit's generous gifting into account, and our image of what we are up to changes dramatically. Take the Spirit's gifting into account, and we shift our attention from all that is ours to do to all that we've been given to get it done. Take the Spirit's gifting into account, and we begin to see how the common good really is being upheld through the ways we each make use of what we have been given.

And one more thing is important to take into account. After Paul laid out his teaching about the Spirit's generous gifting in the twelfth chapter, he wrote what is for us the famous thirteenth chapter about love. We hear this chapter most often at weddings, but hear it in the context of Paul's teaching: "I may have spiritual gifts coming out my ears. I may speak in tongues, or have great wisdom, or be a person of admirable faith, or have extraordinary concern for people in need. But if I do not have love, everything I do is worthless— noise and nothingness."

So here's the thing for us, on this Mother's Day, Installation, Disaster Relief, Pentecost Sunday: what it's really all about is how we let love bless and energize

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everything we do It's not a bunch of demands pulling us in too many directions. It's many gifts from one Spirit offered in love for the good of others. That's more than enough to see us through whatever any day asks of us.