

In this third week of our stewardship season, we're considering the third verse of the passage in Peter's first letter we've been reading: "As each one has a gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the multi-faceted grace of God." When you hear the word, "gift," I wonder what first comes to mind? For our young disciples – how many just thought "birthday" or "Christmas"? That may be true for some of not-so-young disciples as well, and if that's you, just to let you know there are 44 days until Christmas. When we talk about gifts in the church, we often think about financial gifts. Certainly we do during stewardship season. But there are all kinds of gifts. Paul has a few lists of them in his letters: "words of wisdom; words of knowledge; faith; healing; the working of miracles; prophecy; speaking in tongues – and interpreting them." Some of those make some of us uncomfortable, either because we're not exactly sure what they are, or because of an experience we had at a church quite different than this one. So, there are financial gifts, and something we often call "spiritual gifts," and Paul writes to the Ephesians to talk about the gifts *they* had received: "That some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and some teachers." If I were to ask you which of those particular gifts you thought *you* might have, I suspect if you were to name any, it would probably be "teacher." "Apostles. Prophets. Evangelists. Pastors. Teachers." These gifts, Paul writes, are given for the purpose of "equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." But, as I just noted, most of us would not identify with those words, often because of the way we talk about them. I mean, when you hear about the apostle *Paul*, or the apostle *Peter*, who's going to say, 'Hi. I'm the apostle *Preston*.' Or, 'the apostle *Peggy*.' Right? Or, 'Hi. I'm the prophet Judith. Or the prophet Jim.' But what if these aren't titles to be claimed, but, rather, descriptors of gifts? Identifying a way that some people see the world, rather than being a title of some other-worldly role?

In a former life I was part of the Forge International teaching team. Forge is a missional training group, helping churches reimagine institutional life in light of the mission of God we find in the bible, and this passage is central to Forge's understanding of what kind of leadership is necessary to move churches in a missional direction. Forge calls this list the APEST model of five-fold leadership – Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Shepherds and Teachers – all of which are necessary for healthy leadership. Each role ensures the church doesn't emphasize one way of being at the expense of the others. They ensure that *one* way we *could* be the church doesn't become the *only* way. The five gifts help the church maintain a healthy tension as to its identity.

So, Apostles. These are the entrepreneurs. They're literally "the sent ones" in Greek. They're often the ones leading new ventures, exploring new opportunities, calling the church beyond the existing structures and programs. Asking the "what if...?" questions. They're the risk takers. They can be dynamic, charismatic, always saying, "Come on, let's do this!" If you want to upset an apostle, just say, "But we've always done it this way." Apostles are

essential to keep the church from stagnation. But the shadow side of being an apostle, is that they're tempted to neglect the folk who are already here. To pull people and resources from current ventures to support their new project. *And* they can be exhausting to be around! Which is why apostles are just *one* of the gifts the church needs.

Prophets – contrary to popular imagination – do not predict the future! The prophet's role is often to help the church understand the gap between “what is” and “what should be,” whether that's in the church, or in society. They listen for God's truth, and challenge the status quo when it fails to provide the kind of life God intends all to experience. They desire to see the kin-dom of God lived out in concrete and tangible ways. They're the ones texting me this week and asking, “Is there anything the church can do to help folk who've been furloughed and aren't being paid?” And, “How are we going to step up if and when our food insecure neighbors struggle even more than usual?” Prophets are essential to keep the church from becoming a comfortable place for its own members. But the shadow side of being a prophet is that they can often be impatient, especially when people don't respond as quickly as they think they should. They can become judgmental, self-righteous. And, like the apostle, can sometimes be exhausting to be around! And so they're just *one* of the gifts the church needs.

Evangelists – well, what image does that word conjure up for you? At their best, evangelists just love getting people involved in all the good things going on in the life of the church. Their joy is infectious, they enjoy meeting new people and helping them find their way into the life of the church. They're comfortable sharing their own faith with others. Evangelists are essential if we want the church to grow in terms of participation. But the shadow side of being an evangelist, well, most of us have experienced that at one time or another probably. They can sometimes be poor listeners, or even manipulative, as they try to get people to make decisions of some kind, and, in doing so, they can actually drive people away rather than draw them in. And again, they're just *one* of the gifts the church needs.

Next are pastors, although Forge prefers to use the word “shepherds,” because “pastor” usually makes people think of a paid professional. Shepherds are those who protect and provide. The ones who care for those around them both as individuals and as the community. They notice when people are absent, or hurting. They work to ensure the community is experienced as a safe and loving environment, and they have a strong sense of loyalty to the community, and those within it. The shadow side of shepherds is they can be so attuned to the feelings of others, that they can be guided by the fear of offending people. They can also be slow to act sometimes, imagining all the potential *negative* outcomes of a decision, coupled with the fear of disappointing people, and so can sometimes resist any change to the status quo. And – again! – they're just one of the gifts the church needs.

Finally, there are teachers. These are the people who love to help people learn truth and wisdom. They want people to understand scripture, and theology and the church. They develop classes and curricula to pass on knowledge from generation to generation. The shadow side of teachers is that, sometimes, all that knowledge doesn't lead to action. And their temptation is to believe that all people need in order to change is information. To *think* the right way. They can discount the importance of being in relationship with others. They can also become rigid in that thinking, seeing things in terms of 'right and wrong,' and get frustrated when people don't see things as *they* do. Teachers. *One* of the gifts the church needs.

Well, that's a thumbnail sketch of the fivefold model of leadership we find in Ephesians 4. Perhaps you heard a description of yourself in one or more of those five roles. For some of us, it's quite likely we heard a description of ourselves more in the *shadow* side of those gifts. If that's true for you – as it is for *me* – don't be discouraged! Because it's precisely *that* – the *shadow* side of a *good* gift from God. And our work is to lean into that gift, while paying attention to when we're straying into the shadow side of it. And not become defensive when someone points that out to us! Perhaps you thought of someone *else* as you listened to the descriptions. If so – I encourage you to tell them – and why you believe they have that gift. Some of us heard ourselves in more than one of those descriptions, which is often the case.

When it comes to clergy, it's true that many – if not most – are shepherd-teachers. But all *five* roles, all five *gifts* that Paul lists here, are essential, in order to equip the saints for ministry, and build up the body of Christ, the church. So, when the shepherd wants to make sure everyone in the church is cared for, the prophet says, 'but what about others?' When the teacher says, "*Here's* how you should think about this," the apostle says, 'But what about trying something *new*?' When the evangelist says, 'Let's all focus on bringing people in!' the shepherd says, 'But not to the neglect of those already here.' And so on. And so on. If there are only one or two gifts being expressed in leadership, then the body we build can become misshapen. We need *all* these gifts, all these roles, if we're to build a healthy body.

And this isn't just about leadership. My guess is each one of us is shaped by at least one of these five gifts, and that gift shapes our orientation towards others. It also shapes how we use all the *other* gifts and talents we have, whatever they might be. So, I'd like to conclude by talking briefly *about* those other gifts. Every Sunday, I sit beside a beautiful flower arrangement, a small reminder in *here* of all the beauty that God has given us *out there*. This morning, Carrie Gilbert's gift for arranging brings color to our worship. Often, it's Elspeth Cobb's gift we enjoy. Not everyone has an eye for arrangement, but we're fortunate to have folk who do, and enjoy sharing their gift with us. Not everyone can hold a tune. Or play an instrument. And while I firmly believe we should sing out *regardless* of how we sound, we enjoy the gifts our sanctuary and bell choirs bring us each week, as well as those musicians who serve with their instruments. But in some ways, those are *easy* gifts to identify, because the church has always valued them. But what of our other gifts and talents? Those that

perhaps aren't appreciated in the same way? What *hobbies* do we have that we've *never* thought of as something we can offer as a gift to our church? I've talked before about my friend Peter, who's an amazing knitter. He started a knitting circle in the church we both served in Houston, a circle that has grown over time, and which has provided hundreds of prayer shawls for folk in hospital or nursing and rehab facilities. Tangible, comforting, warm expressions of love for those who find themselves in what can often be a cold, and scary place.

There are folk among us who love to grow food, and flowers, and who share from their abundance, but who, perhaps, have never thought of that love for gardening as a gift that could find expression in church in some way. There are photographers in our midst, who can capture in a moment more than just what's happening, but convey an emotion. Our social media game is weak – that's a gift we certainly need! For me, it's board games – a pastime I love, and am nearly always up for. They're a simple way to connect with others, and learn new skills – strategy, resource management, cooperation – all while seated around a table, and hopefully having fun. They're a way to foster intergenerational interaction that everyone enjoys. The challenge is, so many of us have so little time in our schedules to offer our gifts. So please don't hear this as an invitation to find one more thing you *ought* to do! This is simply another invitation to be open to a conversion of the imagination. To take something you're already doing – that you *enjoy* doing – and wonder how you might fold others into it in lifegiving ways. How that gift or hobby might be part of God's work of “building up the body in love.”

So, to that end, when you look at this year's pledge card, you'll notice we've added a couple of lines at the bottom. There's a place to put your name – again - and then a place to write at least one gift or talent you have that you'd be open to sharing with the church in some way. For those with more than one person in your household, there's an additional card so everyone – young disciples included – can write at least one gift or talent. When we turn those pledge cards in next week, the financial gift portion will be separated from the gift part (which is why you need to write your name twice), and while the financial portion goes to the church administrator, I'm looking forward to seeing what kinds of gifts and talents we have in our congregation! I suspect there will be some gifts that several of us share. And maybe we'll hear an invitation to find ways to share those gifts with one another in the coming year, as well as with the wider community.

So, I hope you'll take as much time thinking about what gifts and talents you're open to sharing, as you will what kind of financial commitment you're able to make in 2026. And a year from now, I can't wait to reflect on all the new ventures we've engaged in as a congregation! So that we will continue – as Paul writes to the Ephesians – “to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament by which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.” May it be so. And amen.