

VARIETIES OF GIFTS

— 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 —

A number of years ago, a popular children's book imagined a brightly colored fish swimming through a great sea. I think at least a part of the book's appeal, at least with young children, were the glittery images of the different scales on this special fish. He was called—for obvious reasons—*The Rainbow Fish*. And he loved and was proud of his brightly colored scales—who wouldn't be?—and he was very offended when a little blue fish, an ordinary fish, came up to him and asked him: Could he please give him one of his bright shining scales? Just a little one, please. Of course, he wouldn't give up one of his scales! Those were the things that made him beautiful! They belonged to him! And the beautiful Rainbow Fish swam away from the little blue fish.

Today is a kind of a "Rainbow Day," for it is the Day of Pentecost, the day that the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples, all gathered in one place. It was a day of brightness, and great power—the colors of fire and the sound of wind, a day God opened God's hand and poured forth gifts on ordinary people, scared people, wondering people. A variety of gifts came down from heaven, and caused ordinary disciples to do things they never imagined that they would do.

So what do we do to make this day special? Some of us wear red—a bright color—to try to capture the passion, the excitement of that day long ago. Sometimes a congregation will try to capture the energy by hearing the readings in different languages, or bringing wind chimes, or some other sound effect. What can we do really to help us to experience what it was like on that day? One moment the disciples are inside the house, together—the next they are outside—with tongues of fire dancing on their heads and the word of God dancing on their lips. That's what it looked like, when the apostles first received the gifts of the Spirit: a rainbow of color and sound.

The gifts of the Spirit: that's what Paul is talking about as well, in our lesson from First Corinthians. "There are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit," he tells them. "There are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." So the Holy Spirit that fell down on the believers on Pentecost kept falling on Christians—even in Corinth—giving them a variety of gifts, glittery and beautiful. And the Holy Spirit that fell on Pentecost—and that fell on the Corinthians—as well falls on us, here and now, and gives us as well a variety, a rainbow of gifts.

Except that with the Corinthians there was a problem. And we get an inkling of the problem as we read Paul's letter, when he tells them: "To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." It seems that the Christians in Corinth were acting a little like the Rainbow Fish—they were proud of their beautiful gifts, and they used them to compete with each other, to try to figure out who was better. They thought that the gifts they had received were for their own benefit only, and not for the sake of one another—for the common good, as Paul writes.

So what was supposed to be a good thing turned out to be the cause of pride and arguing and division. There are many gifts – Paul reminds us – but only one Lord, only one God – and our many gifts are to be used for one another's sake, for the "common good."

"The common good"—we hear this phrase sometimes, in a political way, and in fact, Paul is borrowing it from the political life of his own day. But what does it mean? I once heard a friend of mine talking about living in a cooperative *versus* a condominium. They seem similar in many ways. Both are places where people live together. They are something like apartment buildings, but they are different. He explained the difference this way: "In a condominium you think about what's good for *me*. In a cooperative, you think about what's good for *us*—and that's good for *me*."

To me, that's also a good description of "the common good"—there are some things that are just good for me, but there are also things that are good for us, for all of us, that make our community better—more beautiful, more just. Paul writes that the many varieties of spiritual gifts that have been given to us as Christians are not simply for our own benefit, but to share with one another. Then he recites a list of gifts: wisdom and knowledge, healing and miracles and tongues—not in an attempt to limit our minds about God's gifts, but I think to expand them.

There are probably many more gifts than these listed: gifts of listening as well as speaking, gifts of compassion and mercy, gifts of hospitality. Paul wants to open our minds to the many gifts that the Spirit is giving to us—and to those around us. For I think the Corinthians had a limited vision of both God's gifts—and of who could have them.

You know there are two pitfalls for us when we think about the subject of gifts of the Spirit. And one is the pitfall that the Rainbow Fish fell into: He believed that his beautiful scales were given just for him, to make him beautiful. The first one is pride—and a temptation to think of ourselves as better than someone else.

But there's another temptation as well—and that's the temptation to think that we don't have any gifts, that what we do isn't valuable, that we are useless. Perhaps it's either because we are too young or too old. Perhaps because we think we are too small and insignificant. Perhaps it is because others put us down, and tell us we don't know what we're talking about. Sometimes you might be tempted to just give up, because others are ignoring you, don't think you have a contribution to make.

I remember many years ago seeing a cover of *The Lutheran* magazine that shocked me. It was a picture of a starving child in the Sudan. I remember that it was so painful to see that in our house, we kept it face down on our coffee table. And I remember that many people wrote

letters to the editor of *The Lutheran*, protesting because they had put such an image on the cover of their magazine.

And finally, I remember hearing that a Sunday School class somewhere had seen that picture, and decided to collect pennies to send to those children. “If everyone would do a little, it would be a lot, and there would be no more starving children,” they said. And I am glad that no one told them that they did not have a gift to share, for the common good. I think they had the gift of faith. What do you think?

I was privileged to go to the 9th grade confirmation retreat last weekend. One of the things we do on the retreat (besides not get much sleep) is to complete a “Spiritual Gifts Inventory” on Friday night. There some of the students discover that they have the gift of Leadership, others Encouragement, some the gift of Service and others Administration, or Mercy, or Hospitality.

Then on Saturday, they spend the afternoon at doing a “challenge course” where they spend about 3 hours using these gifts (and others) for the “common good”: to complete challenges that they could not do alone. The different tasks required coordination and imagination, leadership and compassion – and many other gifts, too many to be numbered. And they required that the 1students learn to work together for the good of all.

There is one more pitfall, too, when we consider the gifts of the spirit: and that is to forget what *our* common good is. For us who gather here this morning, and for the apostles who gathered on that first Pentecost, our common good is the common mission of going out into the world, and sharing the love of God in word and deed. Our common good is to share—not just with one another—but with our neighbors and with strangers, with friends and with enemies—the hope that is in us. Our common good is to share God's wide and forgiving love—and do it with

words and deeds of mercy and justice.

We have a beautiful gospel, a story of a God who loves us each in all of our variety, who came to heal us and forgive us and to share his life with us, and to die for us. We have a beautiful gospel of a God who took a small band of ordinary people—gave them a mission, gave them gifts, and made them into a Church. And in this Church, even one of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the richest to the poorest, has gifts to share—with us, and with the world.

At the end of the story of the Rainbow Fish, the little Rainbow fish finally learns to share. It is a difficult lesson for him, but he starts to give away his beautiful scales, one by one, to the other fish in the sea. Finally, all he has left is one beautiful scale—but the sea is filled with color, and filled with life, and filled with glittering fish. That is the vision for us as well: to go out and share our many gifts, so that finally, in the end, the whole world is filled with the love of God in Christ. Amen.

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Woodlake + Richfield
Pr. Diane M. Roth