

“Gifted and Talented”

1 Corinthians 12.1–11

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 30 August 2009

If you were going to build a community, where would you begin? You’d start with people, of course. Humans are the core of any community, though the natural and physical environment are critical, as are other creatures.

As European Americans expanded westward in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they had the opportunity to try their hand at community building. The landscape was dotted with utopian communities – settlements like the Amana Community founded by German Pietists in Iowa and the Oneida Community in New York, started by a would-be clergyman who was denied ordination in the Congregational Church in New York. (*It is ironic that their lasting legacies are Amana refrigerators and Oneida stainless flatware!*) The utopian ideals were a uniquely American contribution to Christian history, and not one that always had a positive legacy. But, it was the utopian communities that looked at what people could build and to try to create something ideal in the here and now, rather than waiting for a heavenly reward or for a “rapture” following the Second Coming.

We at Plymouth are not out to create a separate community of “true believers” who are going to live apart, but we do have something to say about the creation of a distinct community within the 21st century context of the United States: a context that is marked most heavily by materialism, consumption, and out-of-balance individualism. We’re trying to be co-creators of the kingdom of God here and now through our witness for justice, peace, wholeness, education, and compassion. Rather than separating ourselves from the mainstream like our Pilgrim forbears in Plymouth, Massachusetts, we are out change the dominant paradigm – the way people think about themselves and their relationship to God, self, and other.

Over the past several years, many within this congregation have read a management book called, *The Servant*, and we have embraced servant leadership as a paradigm for our individual ministries within church and society. The bottom line is that each of us has a lot to give, and rather than using our talents simply for personal gain, we share our gifts for the commonwealth. Did you notice that Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, did not say, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for one’s own gain?” Of course not! He says that the Spirit creates abilities within us for “the common good.”

So, returning to my original question, what people and what skills do we need to create a community? The short answer that all the people we need are or will be here, and we need *all the gifts* you have to bring. Monday, I talked with two of Plymouth’s interviewers for the Homelessness Prevention Initiative. Tuesday, Sharon and I met with our parish nurses who bring their health ministry into the mix for Plymouth. Wednesday, I caught up with Dave Smith, chair of our trustees, who keep the building and grounds in shape. Then, I saw a team of women who put your newsletter together each month after it is edited and designed by a volunteer. And last Wednesday night, I was here as the choir and search committee auditioned candidates for a new choir director. At the same time, the new teachers for the “Our Whole Lives” sexuality curriculum were meeting. And Thursday, Sharon sent out a request for prayers to people on our email prayer tree. Think about the gifts and skills this segment of our congregation brings to the table: interpersonal compassionate care, medical knowledge, design and editing, facilities management, office work, musical talent, and discernment of leadership skills. That’s a four-day snapshot that didn’t take into account a LOT of other ways people are

offering their gifts to Plymouth. Look around you this morning! A member of this church cooked breakfast to raise scholarship funds for our outdoor ministry at La Foret; someone unlocked the church, made your coffee, greeted you at the door; our sound engineers and deacons make the services run smoothly, and you've heard an incredible voice from someone who grew up here at Plymouth and gives their art as a gift.

You'll notice that I didn't mention the staff very much, because while we are here to coach, to inspire, and to organize, the vast majority of the work here at Plymouth is done by countless volunteers – people like you who have found a way to tap into the gifts and graces that God has given you and to put them forward as an offering to God: people who are doing more than keeping a pew warm on Sunday morning.

No matter where you look at Plymouth, you will see the work of volunteers. “Now 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 it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”

None of us is excepted from this: each person here is the recipient of gifts of the Spirit. I want to read a brief quote from Dr. King: “Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. All you need is a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”¹

We sometimes separate kids into classes for the “gifted and talented,” but I've got news for you: every person in this sanctuary is “gifted and talented,” not just because we're great achievers, but because we have been given gifts by the Spirit.

I have never been a part of a congregation with a greater range and depth of talented members than Plymouth. Not only does that mean that we are a “gifted and talented” bunch of people, it also means that we tend to be busy.



Let me share a story with you. It's a story about two gifted and talented people who have “a soul generated by love.” John Philips was the president of Columbia Records and worked in Manhattan. As you might imagine, John was a busy man. But unlike some high-powered executives, John was a committed member of his church, Second Congregational UCC in Greenwich, Connecticut. (John is 89 now and is still a member.) For some reason, John felt called to a ministry with young people. Each Sunday, John would spend time with the junior high students at the church as one of their teachers. John would stop by Dunkin' Donuts (a New England institution second only to Congregationalism) and pick up a dozen sugar-encrusted carbohydrate packets for his Sunday School class. And about once a month, John would do something that warmed the heart of every teenager in the room: he would bring in a foot-high stack of Columbia's latest demo LPs (for you young folks, that's the vinyl disc that recorded music came on before there were CDs and iPods). Not only that, John told his junior high Sunday School class that it was okay to ask the tough questions and to have doubts – to approach our faith with intellectual integrity.

And John had a “partner in crime” named Phyllis Jacob. Phyllis went with this class of wild, young kids in Sunday School from fourth to fifth to sixth grade and then on to junior high, where she teamed up with John. Every Sunday, they would gather the

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., in Marion Wright Edelman, *Guide My Feet*. (Boston: Beacon, 2000), p. 114.

kids in the conference room of Second Congo and help them understand a little bit more about God, themselves, and the world around them. Phyllis has continued to be incredibly active in giving her time and talent, and the other thing that Phyllis shared was unconditional love. And it wasn't just with Sunday School, it was with the Mission Committee, chairing the Church Council, orienting new members, serving on the Fairfield Association Church and Ministry Committee, and a host of other ministries both inside and beyond the church. Phyllis cared passionately about the young souls in her care, and when one of the kids had a question, Phyllis would always try to find the answer, sometimes clipping a magazine story and sending it through the post, which is what we did before email. Phyllis had three children of her own, and an executive husband who traveled extensively. She didn't have a lot of time on her hands, but she made time to live out her faith.

I don't just tell you about John and Phyllis because they are wonderful people – which they are – I share a tiny sliver of their story because without them and their ministry, I would not be standing in this pulpit this morning. You see, John and Phyllis were *my Sunday School teachers*. And growing up, church was my anchor to reality, my home, and these two people were my mentors and friends. This was about 35 years ago (before Sharon was even born), and the positive memories are still fresh in my mind.

Yesterday afternoon, I called John and Phyllis and talked with them about what motivated them to teach. John said that the reason he made a commitment to teach was his concern that teens were beginning to think for themselves, and a lot of us thought that Christianity was just some kind of myth that we were supposed to believe in. John brought in geography and history to unpack the faith. Yesterday, he told me, “You don't have to believe this because someone told you to believe it. You believe it when you start to figure it out for yourself.” John recalled that “Teaching you kids was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life... The teacher gets as much out of it as the students.”

When I spoke with Phyllis, she told me that for her, teaching Sunday School was very much a calling. She shared with me a story of a difficult time in her own life and that when she was able to turn things over to God she felt an incredible sense of peace. That led her to want to live out her faith in tangible ways. She said that “the church was looking for Sunday School teachers, and once I got started, I couldn't get enough of it. The joy and excitement of my faith has never left.”

One of the things I got to do yesterday was to say, “thank you,” to these two wonderful people who gave their time in the 1970s at a UCC church in Connecticut...to share their gifts and their talents in living out their faith. Henry Adams once wrote, “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” And I thank God that John's and Phyllis's influence lives on in me and in my ministry.



What gift is stirring within you, just waiting to be tapped? What talent do you have to share that will make a difference in the lives of people who need your contributions? What has the Spirit implanted in your soul for the common good? What offering do you have to return to God and God's people?

In closing, I share these words from Teresa of Avila, a mystic of the sixteenth century, who wrote:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours, no feet but your.
Yours are the eyes through which Christ's
compassion is to look out to the world.

Yours are the feet with which Christ is to
go about doing good.
Yours are the hands with which Christ is to
bless all people now.

You are gifted and talented: may you use what the Spirit has given you for the
good of all God's people.
Amen.