

“Gifts Differing”

Romans 12.1–8

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 10 September 2006

One of the things that I love best about Plymouth is that we are a learning congregation. Few of us are satisfied to rest on our laurels and leave our current perspectives in the same place or to leave our intellectual transmissions in “Park.” We have an extraordinary education program for our kids in kindergarten through fifth grade, which uses Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory as the modality for teaching the stories of our faith, and we have classes for preschoolers, junior high, and senior high. But the learning doesn’t stop there. Every Sunday during the program year, we have an adult education program that offers a forum and two book studies. Learning is something that starts at birth and hopefully never stops.

The second verse of this familiar passage from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is somewhat striking about learning: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Just a side note: when Paul writes about “*this world*,” think of it as a single term that refers not to the natural world around us, but rather to the force of civilization that undermines God’s intention for us, whether through greed, violence, materialism, chauvinism, or any of the other negative characteristics of society then or now. Paul intends the term as a contrast to *the kingdom of God* – the way the world would be if God were immediately and directly in charge of our daily affairs. Importantly, Paul isn’t contradicting Genesis, in which God declares the created world good, nor John’s gospel, which says that “God so loved the world that he gave his only son.”¹ The world is not inherently bad, but we humans manage to make a mess of things on a regular basis.

Back to that second verse: “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds,” which intimates that you really ought to bring your brain with you to church. Krister Stendahl, who was dean of Harvard Divinity School and the Lutheran bishop of Stockholm writes, “Rational being who do not conform to this age but who are transformed in their *nous*, their mind, [and] can figure out or approve or discern what is good, what is acceptable, what is perfect, what is the will of God. That is the tone that Paul is setting in what follows: Let’s think straight. ‘Transformed in our minds’ . . . [means] renewed minds. We don’t hear this so much in some translations because, sadly, we are not much for the mind in the church. Heart language is always closer to the church. No one ever really says that you have to sharpen your brain in Jesus’ name. It is always the heart, and that is not good.”²

I know that for me considering and acting on my faith always a balancing act between the heart and head, between feeling and reason, between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. We don’t have to compartmentalize faith and reason; they coexist beautifully. From what I’ve observed over the last four years at Plymouth, most of us have little trouble using our minds as a way to apprehend our faith, which is one of the reasons that many of us found our way into this place . . . because your questions, your doubts, your ideas, your feelings, and your whole being all are welcomed.

At the same time, I want to affirm a multiple intelligence approach to the sacred. Howard Gardner identified seven types of intelligence: linguistic, logical-mathematical,

¹ John 3.16

² Krister Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 46.

musical, spatial (and visual), bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal (understanding between persons), and intrapersonal (understanding oneself).

So, when I talk about how a Greek word might be translated into English, that is linguistic intelligence. When you are moved by the organ, that is musical intelligence. When you meditate silently, that's intrapersonal intelligence, and so on. Not every one of us has the same types of intelligence in the same measure, so we as clergy and worship leaders need to try and be sure to take more than just one tack in our approach to the sacred.

“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” Today, we honor teaching, one of the gifts that Paul enumerates. But, I also want to be sure that each person in this room knows that he or she is the recipient of a different gift. And I also know that we have a deep need to share our gifts with others. I know that Megan Campain has a gift for relating to kids, that Phil Hoefer has a gift being able to care for this building, that Larry McCulloch has a gift for managing people, that Geri Stutheit has a gift for visual art, that Gail Knoblock and Claudia Karp have a gift for hospitality, that Hugh Sanborn has a gift for acting for justice. Those are only a few folks. I want you to think with me for a moment: what is your gift? What do you do really well? What do you feel passionately about? What would gift would you like to share? Now, just shout out your gift. Go ahead. Say it out loud!

Did you notice how many different talents were mentioned? The words that just came from your lips are important. These gifts are a part of who you are. And that makes them spiritual gifts.

Gifts are meant to be shared not squandered. And the amazing part about these gifts is that you can give them without losing them. Sure, it takes commitment and energy, but your gift might even wind up being sharpened by the experience of sharing it. I hope you will take the Time and Talent form from your September Placard, fill it in, and place it in the gift bag Sharon decorated and placed on the Fellowship Hall bulletin board. And there are extra copies if you don't have a form with you.

Can you imagine what Plymouth would be like if you all *didn't* share your gifts? It would be dead. A few weeks back, we had a new family start attending Plymouth. On their first day, they signed up to work at the church yard sale, attend the all-church retreat at La Foret, and to teach Sunday School. *That's sharing!* And that kind of giving of oneself is what keeps the church alive.

When we present ourselves as a “living sacrifice,” it means that we need to share our gifts, but that we don't have to kill ourselves in the process. Sacrifice in religious traditions is a way of building relationship with God. Most of us don't offer animals as an offering these days, but we offer something more precious: ourselves. We offer our prayers, our compassion, our leadership, our service, and any number of gifts.

One of the adjectives most of you would not use to describe Plymouth is *charismatic*. But I would! The Greek word *charism* means gift, and those who are charismatic are gifted. (*Charismatic Christians aren't just people who speak in tongues: they have many gifts but one Spirit.*) This is one of the most talented congregations I know of, and we're still learning about ways that we can share our gifts for ministry.

Together as a congregation, we learn to share our gifts and to receive the gifts others share with us. It's an amazing symbiosis, and it gives us a glimpse into the possibilities that lay before us: not of “*this world*,” but of God's kingdom unfolding in our midst. Our society needs your gifts; Plymouth needs your gifts; and God needs your gifts. May we have the grace to give them and receive them.

Amen.