

Sermon #242
Romans 12:1-8; Eph. 4:11-16
Sunday, May 27, 2018 (Title slide)

A Gift to Use

And now for the story you've all been waiting for! Drum roll please.... (Slide 2) This story is entitled, "The Airport Fiasco." (Slide 3) Or it could be, "The Lost Suitcase." (Slide 4) Or it could be, The Desperate, Left-behind Preacher! Murphy's Law was written all over this journey. Whatever possibly could have gone wrong, did go wrong.

(Slide 5) It all started on a windy, cold April morning. Snow was flying when Rachel left me off at the Cincinnati airport. Our departure was already delayed while they de-iced the plane. But not to worry, the plane in Boston was delayed also. And was it ever delayed. It was supposed to leave Boston for New York's JFK airport at 6:30, but actually left at 10:30 p.m. I was supposed to have had 5 hours at JFK while meeting up with the rest of the 33 people from United Methodist Churches in Pennsylvania. But I actually arrived at 11:45 p.m., the exact same time my flight to Tel Aviv was supposed to leave. I even had to wait longer on board the flight as they had to tow the airplane to the loading port. We finally arrived, and the host sent an airport rep to help me run to the next gate where my flight was waiting.

I arrived there and found myself interrogated with all kinds of questions. "Why are you going to Israel?" "Do you know anyone in Israel?" Finally, they allowed me to board and I fell into my seat exhausted, hoping that maybe my bag could somehow still make it on the plane. About an hour into the flight, a lady in the back of the plane shrieked as a man fell to the floor, apparently in cardiac arrest. As flight attendants rushed to attend him, my anxiety level hit the roof. Fortunately, the man somehow recovered and no more scenes took place on board. I did get to see our team host during the flight and he told me that we would all meet at the baggage claim area when we arrived in Tel Aviv. "No, problem," I said. "I'll meet you there."

Nine hours of flight time later, we deplaned and walked a long way down to immigration and then the baggage claim. I stood beside all the people in the front of the plane where I was sitting, but I did not see my hosts or anyone else in my group (of course I hadn't even met the others yet). As I feared, my bag did not arrive. A nice young man working with Educational Opportunities told me where we would meet in the baggage claim area and also pointed me in the direction of lost and found. So, I went there, stood in line, still looked back to see if my group had arrived, but never saw them. Finally, I put my claim in and answered many questions. Then I went back to where the young man told me to wait. And I waited and waited. No group from Educational Opportunities was there, nor my hosts, that I did know.

After an hour or so, I finally left the baggage claim area and went out through customs. Another hour later, I decided it was time to call someone and fortunately I had the phone number for the hotel where we would be staying at in Bethlehem. I called

and a friendly young lady on the other side told me that my tour group had already left. “They left the airport?” I asked. I couldn’t believe it. Did they forget me? Why had they left? She told me that she would send me her taxi driver to get me, but it would cost me \$150. Another huge blow! But when I gave her my phone number she asked, “Are you from Dayton, Ohio?” “Yes,” I said. “So, am I,” she said. What a relief to hear of someone from back home. Her taxi driver arrived about an hour later and I finally reached the hotel about 11:30 p.m. totally spent from the most chaotic journey imaginable.

(Slide 6) Later in the week, I found out more about our host who had come to my rescue. Not only was she from Dayton, Ohio, but she was a missionary in Israel with the Board of Global Ministries. And guess what church she is a member of here in Dayton? Her home church is St. Paul United Methodist Church, one of our partner churches. And this summer she will be at annual conference where she will be commissioned as a deacon. Her name is Elizabeth Heft. I am grateful for people like Elizabeth, who are answering the call of God in their lives and using their gifts. Someone from right here in Dayton, from a sister United Methodist Church no less, is using her gifts in this way to help the body of Christ around the world. God certainly used Elizabeth to help me in my moment of need. That was a moment when his grace broke through in a unique way in a very trying time.

In Romans chapter 12, the apostle Paul wrote to young Christians about their spiritual gifts that God had given them. In this chapter, Paul comes to a highlight or a climax in this whole letter. He has been building up to this point to emphasize the redeemed, transformed life for all Christians. He wrote in verse 1, (Slide 7) “I appeal to you...” Or other versions say, “I plead with you...” Or “I encourage you...” Or “I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. Thus, he begins by urging them strongly to live holy lives that do not conform to this world, but are transformed by the renewing of their minds. He teaches them many ways to do that. But standing out among all of them is their use of spiritual gifts.

These spiritual gifts have much to do with the transformed way of life. And they have much to do with our current sermon series during the season of Pentecost on why the church exists. Most of us have heard sermons about spiritual gifts or have taken tests to determine our own gifts, but what do we really know about them? Are we always aware of their importance, of how they help each of us and the whole church grow together? (Slide 8) And more importantly what are they for – what purpose do they serve? Let’s look at them in two steps this morning, first receiving them, second, using them.

(Slide 9)

1. Receive the gift.

We all like to receive a gift, right? It makes us feel good, loved, and appreciated. Here, let’s demonstrate this. (Have JP stand up and receive the gift of the guitar pics.) JP as our music director and as my friend, I just want to say thank you and give you this

gift. (Have Jordan stand up and give him a gift with pens and pencils in it.) Jordan, as our associate pastor and friend, I want to give you this gift. (And to Connie as well.)

Yes, there is an art in giving gifts and an art in receiving them. Paul makes it clear that God gives the gifts to us – to all of us, each individual Christian receives a gift or gifts, but no one receives all the gifts. The Holy Spirit distributes them graciously to all in a wide-ranging, diverse manner. And we don't earn these gifts. We simply receive them. God loves to give good gifts to his children and he wants us to receive them. And actually, we already have received them, but we may not be aware of them. If you have repented of your sins and are following Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then you have received a gift or gifts as part of the transformed life. You need to be aware of them and receive them.

(Slide 10, show the passages with the gifts)

So, what are these spiritual gifts? Paul outlines them here in Romans 12, also in 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4. And 1 Peter 4:9-11, also mentions them. And their usage is evident throughout the New Testament. One Spiritual Gift Inventory describes spiritual gifts as (Slide 11) “ways by which Christ works within the life of believers to edify and strengthen the Church. Through these gifts we bring glory and honor to God and bless believers and non-believers alike.” These gifts are not natural gifts or talents like playing the piano or crafting. Natural talents are good and should be used too. Spiritual gifts come from God and not ourselves. We don't earn them, we receive them and realize what they are. Sometimes others help us understand and receive them.

I've told you before about my high school drama and speech professor who helped me realize my love for drama and public speaking. The first time I spoke in public at age 17 I was a nervous wreck. But he soon helped change all of that and help me understand that it was part of my gifting and helped me grow in my gifting. Today, I use this gift in preaching, teaching, drama, and many other ways to help edify the body of Christ. And that's where we now turn. We are called to use them or share them. And how or why do we use them?

(Slide 12)

2. Use or share the gift(s) we receive

One of the first things that Paul highlights here in Romans 12, even before referring to spiritual gifts, has to do with the attitude in using them. Gifts must be used with the right attitude. In verse 3 he says, (Slide 13) *“Because of the grace that God gave me [he starts out humbly himself], I can say to each one of you: don't think more highly than you ought to think. Instead be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you.”* And 1 Peter 4:10 exhorts us to *“serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God's diverse gifts.”* In other words, gifts are to be used in a humble, serving manner and not in a prideful, self-centered way. They are not to be used for show or in any way to show that we are better than others.

No, spiritual gifts are giving for a purpose. They are to be used, used for the edification and building up of the whole body. Paul is clear in all of these passages that all Christians are part of the one body of Christ. There is one Lord, and one Spirit and one body. And each of us make up that one body. Thus, we are not to think only of ourselves but for the good of all. In 1 Cor. 12:7, Paul affirms that (Slide 14) “a demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good.” In Ephesians 4:12 and 13, he asserts that God’s purpose in giving gifts was (Slide 15) “for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ until we all reach the unity of faith and knowledge of God’s Son.”

Thus, we are to use our gifts by sharing them humbly and willingly for the benefit of others in the body. When I graduated from high school, my grandparents gave me a Thompson Chain Reference Bible as a present. They did not intend for me to leave it on the shelf and let it collect dust, or to allow it to be my college dorm room decoration. No, they gave it to me as a gift to be used. And did I use it. I preached my first sermons from that Bible and did many a Bible study from it. It became all marked up, studied, memorized, and used for the glory of God and the benefit of all, not just me

Some Christians, however, do not use the gifts that God gives them. They sometimes squander them and leave them on the shelf and end up conforming to the ways of the world, as Paul strongly urges his readers not to do. I did a wedding for a young couple in Ecuador that I felt very fond of. They seemed to be the epitome of young enthusiasm with a maturity beyond many of their peers. However, near the end of their first year of marriage we began to hear of some problems in their relationship. Before long the young husband dropped out of just about everything in the church and had turned against his young bride and his faith. What a tragedy! Here we thought they were going to be the next youth directors and possible pastoral couple. They could have, but something went wrong, and their gifts were left on the shelf.

God’s Word is very clear on this issue here in Romans 12 and throughout. The transformed life with the continual renewing of one’s mind is lived out by receiving and using God’s gifts he gives to all of us. Paul says that whatever your gift is, you must devote yourself to it.

(Slide 16)

Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? There are many tests that you can take to identify them. I have some inventory tests (some on the welcome table) that you can take to find out. Or, better yet, reflect on what you really like to do or what you have a passion about, or what you enjoy doing almost effortlessly and efficiently. Identify that thing in your mind right now. That is most likely your spiritual gift or gifts. If you like to greet people at the door and get to know them and you are good at it, you probably have the gift of hospitality. If you like working in the food pantry and just can’t wait until the next Saturday comes, you may have the gift of serving. If you like to witness of your faith and go visit newcomers, you might have the gift of evangelism or if you like to comfort and encourage others who are grieving, you may have the gift of encouragement. And on it goes. Here is a combined list of gifts from these passages and other places in the Bible. Check where yours might be.

While you are doing that, let's have JP, Jordan and Connie open their gifts. What did you guys receive? Yes, JP receive guitar picks to help him play the guitar and lead music. Jordan received pens and pencils to help him write more good sermons. And Connie received my next song for her to play. They can use these gifts to uplift and edify the body of Christ – all of us.

(Slide 17)

Conclusion

I'm so very thankful that God used Elizabeth Heft, a sister in Christ, a fellow Dayton citizen, and UM member with her gift of hospitality and her calm, reassuring voice to guide me in my desperate time. In what way, through what gift(s) does God want to use you now? Receive his gifts and use them. Each spiritual gift is a gift to be used.