

“You ARE Gifted! Own it!”

Based on I Corinthians 12:1-7 and I Peter 4:10-11

Offered by Toby Jones to ChxUCC on September 6, 2020

Today, we begin a month-long celebration of our gifts and our giftedness. Our Pledge campaign for the 2021 ministry year is “Let’s Celebrate!” And that’s what we intend to do – each and every Sunday in this month-long pledge drive. Underlying our “Let’s Celebrate!” theme is a belief – a belief that might be difficult for some of us to accept. Our desire to celebrate our gifts is based on the premise that each and every one of us *is*, in fact, gifted. Do you believe that? Do you believe that you are a gifted person?

Our two scripture passages for the morning – one from I Corinthians 12 and the other from I Peter 4 – are just two of the many places where scripture affirms that God has given every person gifts. In Corinthians Paul put it this way: “To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Eugene Peterson translates Paul’s words this way: “God’s various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s spirit...Each person is given something to do that shows who God is. Everyone gets it on it; everyone benefits.” The 1st letter of Peter says that, “Each of us should use whatever gift we have received to serve others, faithfully using God’s gifts in their various forms.”

Scripture is abundantly clear on this point, folks: every single one of us has been given gifts from above. You can’t escape it. And yet, for some reason, most of us bristle a bit or even resist thinking of ourselves as “gifted.” It feels arrogant or self-aggrandizing to admit or buy into the fact that we are gifted. We think the word “gifted” should be reserved for the 7-year old who can play Rachmaninoff on the piano or the college kid who can speak 11 languages. When we look at ourselves alongside the Bill Gates’s or the Oprah Winfrey’s of the world, the last word we would ever use to describe ourselves is “gifted.” And yet, scripture affirms again and again that you are a gifted child of God and so am I. And even more than that, God expects us and calls us to use the gifts we’ve been given for the common good, the good of others.

“But what are my gifts?” you might wonder. It’s not always easy to identify the particular gifts we’ve been given, especially if our gifts aren’t of the externally visible variety. I mean, it’s one thing if a person can sing beautifully, master a musical instrument, or play a sport at the professional level. But what if we’re really good at listening or at being non-judgmental or compassionate to others? If our gifts are in organizing things or doing behind-the-scenes work, they might

take a bit longer for us and others to recognize. But make no mistake: each and every one of us IS gifted, and God is depending on us to discern the gifts She has given us *and* to use them to improve this church, this community, and this world.

There's a poem I came across a number of years ago that reveals why we are so reluctant to accept that we are gifted. The poem is called "Our Deepest Fear" and it's by Marianne Williamson, a woman who was actually a Presidential candidate in the Democratic primary of this election cycle. Listen to her powerful, poetic, and prophetic words:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves
Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small
Does not serve the world.
There's nothing enlightened about shrinking
So that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, As children do.
We were born to make manifest
The glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; It's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
As we're liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.

It's time to set aside what Williamson calls "our deepest fear" and to own the fact that we ARE gifted. Our gifts may not be obvious. They may not land us on an Olympic medal platform or as a finalist on The Voice. But make no mistake: God *has* given you gifts, and more importantly, God is depending on you to identify the gifts you have and to use them. "Your playing small does NOT serve the world." "Who are you to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God!" YOU ARE a child of GOD!

Now some of us may feel a little too old to be gifted. Some of us may look back at a time when we felt a bit more capable and competent. But at 65, 75, or 80, it feels highly unlikely that our gifts are going to make this church – let alone the world - a better place. Have you read your Bible lately? Ever heard of a guy named Abraham or his wife Sarah? They weren't exactly spring chickens when God called upon their gifts, right? And what about that old widow at the temple treasury, the one that Jesus dropped everything both he and the disciples were doing so they all could watch as she put the two small coins into the offering box. Jesus said, "You see that woman right there? She put in more than all the others, for while they gave out of their abundance, she gave out of her poverty...she put in everything she had." Sorry, retirees...you don't get a pass where being gifted is concerned. God still has work for you to do with the gifts you've been given. If God didn't still have important work for you to do, you probably wouldn't still be around.

But having said that, I think it is also important to point out that our gifts, talents, and treasures often change as we go through life. What we were good at when we were 20 may not be our strong suit at 50. And what we loved to do at 50 may have lost its thrill at 70, and that's OK. What's important is that we try to stay tuned into God's Spirit and constantly ask God which of our gifts would be most useful to God now. Which gifts of mine could God, the church, and the larger community be most in need of right now, at this moment in my life?

You know that the best news is about this gift stuff is? The way to discover your gift is to pay attention to what brings you joy. What makes you smile? What makes you feel really great inside? Chances are that is what God needs you to turn loose on the world right now. I like the way theologian Fredrick Buechner puts it: "God's vocation for us is found where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need." One thing you will never hear me say as your pastor is something like this: "I don't care if you can't stand doing it; I want you to serve on this committee!" As I work with each of you to help you discover or discern your gifts, I will always start with what makes your heart soar, what makes you smile, and feel really great inside.

My vision for this congregation is that each and every one of us would come to understand our own giftedness and then find an avenue to use our most joy-producing gifts to make this church a better church, this Charlevoix community a better community, and this world a better world. My vision for this congregation is that each of us would find something we love to do, something that brings us deep joy, and that thing would be our particular and personal ministry at 1st Congregational United Church of

Christ. And please keep in mind that that one thing may not be the same thing you were doing 5 or 10 or 25 years ago. In fact, it probably isn't. We do change as we age, and our tastes and passions change as well. So I give each and every one of you permission to say, "I don't want to continue serving the church in that particular way anymore." Can I get an Amen?

At the end of the service today, you are going to receive an envelope from a member of our stewardship squad. In that envelope is a letter we'd like you to read and a card we'd like you to fill out and return. Part of that card asks you to make a financial pledge to this congregation and its ministries. The financial part of stewardship is incredibly important, for if you don't pledge, we can't plan. If you don't pledge, we can't craft a reasonable budget for our family, which is what this church is – a family of faith. So, thanks for pledging. But the other part of the card, which we are focusing on today, asks you what you want to do for the church in the coming year, what gifts you want to use to serve this church family with your time. Please follow your heart and your joy when you fill that part out. Don't feel any obligation to fill it out like you always have before or to say that you want to serve on the same team you've been serving on for the last 20 years. Think about what makes your heart soar *now* and put that down. Maybe you like making cards, like Susan Burke does. Put that down and we'll use your cards to send our sick and shut-in folks. Perhaps you love taking pictures like Don Smith does, in which case we'll put you to work taking photos that will help tell the story of our church and its ministries. Maybe you're like Tina Bowen, who loves helping out in worship as a reader and liturgist. We'd love to put you in our worship line-up from time to time. Or maybe you need some help discerning your gifts. Well that just happens to be one of my specialties. Just put on the card that you'd like to meet with me to explore where your deep joy might meet this church's deepest need.

You *are* gifted...and it's time to *own* that giftedness. No matter what your age, your life will be infinitely more satisfying, as you come to terms with what makes your heart sing and then find a way to turn that loose on the congregation and on the larger Charlevoix community. That's what this year's stewardship drive is all about. That's what "Let's Celebrate!" is all about. Thanks to God, you're gifted...I'm gifted. Let's own it! Let's live like it. Let's Give like it! Let's do it! Amen.