

Rev. Lisa Schrott
September 13, 2026
1 Corinthians 12:4-11
Deeper in Faith: Co-Laborers in Faith

Hear these words of promise from 1 Corinthians 12:

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. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of powerful deeds, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

When I was in graduate school in the 1990's, my friend Patty and I had a daily ritual. We carpooled to Univ. of Connecticut, and on our drive home would talk about our failed experiments and rejected manuscripts and how we were never going to finish and we'd turn down our street and when the house we shared with an eclectic group of folks was in sight, we'd turn to each and say "maybe we got good mail today!" And for a few minutes we eagerly awaited a letter from an old friend or a card from our grandmothers or a care package. Most days we were disappointed, but 35 years later I still remember that secret thrill of going to the mailbox in hopes of good mail. I don't get that same thrill when I open my email. There is something about a letter.

I wonder if the church in Corinth got that same thrill when they received the letter from Paul. The power of a letter. The power of a letter to remind us that we all have a part to play in the grand scheme of life, in the grand scheme of living out our call to love God with all of our heart, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself.

The purpose of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is to advise them on a series of disputed matters and disorders in the congregation. To remind the congregation that the center of their faith is no other but Christ. Corinth was the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. It was a church of people from both a Jewish heritage and those who were not, the Gentiles who came to know Christ through Paul and mission workers. Corinth was a center of commerce, a crossroads on the trade routes and it had a lot of ethnic, cultural and religious diversity and the issues that go along with it. It was a haven for hedonistic lifestyles - there was actually a Greek word coined - *korinthiazesthai* - which meant to live like someone from Corinth or more aptly someone passing through Corinth. We might say today "what happens in Corinth stay in Corinth."

Corinth was also a wealthy town, a town of luxury. Some of you who are my age or older may remember the TV commercials for the Chrysler Cordoba featuring Ricardo Montalban talking about the elegance of the rich Corinthian leather. Corinthian leather was actually a term coined by the Bozell advertising agency.¹ According to Wikipedia, much of the leather used in Chrysler vehicles originated from a supplier located outside Newark, New Jersey. But I'm guessing Corinthian leather sounded better than Newark leather with Montalban's Spanish accent.

The Corinthians had sent a letter asking Paul for advice because there was dissension in the community. Unlike other situations Paul addressed, it wasn't outsiders that were creating the problems. Rather it was the people of Corinth themselves. The church in Corinth was experiencing divisions and dissension: the wisdom of the gospel vs. wisdom of the world; moral and ethical problems: marriage, divorces, lawsuits, sexual sin, worship of idols, stumbling blocks for other believers; conduct during worship - especially the Lord's supper and the use and misuse of spiritual gifts.

As Biblical commentator Karen Stokes notes, "In the Corinthian church, the spiritual gift that was most valued and honored was that of ecstatic speech. This was not surprising, considering the fact that the church was made up primarily of Gentile converts who would have placed high value on prophesying and speaking in tongues, due to the pagan practices common at that time. This emphasis on inspired speech had set up a hierarchy within the church where those who had those particular gifts were more honored than those without."²

Oh, those Corinthians... Paul was a bit frustrated with them and their inability to grasp the essential tenet of Christ's message that all are equal before God. In the chapter before we hear about spiritual gifts, Paul admonishes the Corinthians for the ways they were failing to come to the communion table in a spirit of humility and care for their neighbors.

Not like we ever do such a thing today. One of the powers of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is how much of what he wrote is applicable to our world today, a world where hierarchical ordering of society is rampant, where domination rather than shared power reigns, where supremacy is name of the game. Paul is clear that this not the way the kingdom of God is realized – not for sharing the Lord's Table and not for exercising the gifts of the Spirit.

Paul makes three clear and powerful points in his discourse on the gifts of the Spirit (note we are only hearing a portion of the passage this morning). First is that gifts of the Spirit are

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Corinthian_leather

² Karen Stokes. 1 Corinthians 12:1-11. Pastoral Perspective. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*. Ed. By David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 2013; p254-256

indeed from the Holy Spirit. They are not inherent measures of our individual skills, capacities and aptitudes. Nor are they conferred on us by society because of our educational, artistic, athletic, business or financial achievements (or those of our families). Nor can we will ourselves to have a particular gift. Rather they are freely given to everyone through the action of the Holy Spirit. They are God's initiative. They are God's gift to us. And in response, we accept the gifts. And we use the gifts.

Paul's second point is that the variety of gifts given by the Holy Spirit are more diverse than we can imagine. Paul lists some of them, but the list is not exhaustive. He provides a range of gifts to stimulate the imagination of the Corinthians, to get them "outside the box" so to speak. Yes, there is the gift of speaking in tongues and prophesying. And there are also gifts of sharing wisdom -what we might call teaching – and gifts of healing and gifts encouraging others. Apparently the Corinthians were not the only group of folks who had difficulty in understanding the diversity of gifts, for Paul reenumerates and expands on them in his letter to church in Rome in chapter 12. Among the gifts he includes are giving, administration, showing mercy and compassion, and serving others. I often fault Paul for using convoluted language to get his point across, but in this morning's passage, Paul is crystal clear that the diversity of gifts comes from God. He says, "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."

The third point Paul makes is one that sometimes get lost in the shuffle, so I want to particularly lift it up: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." There is a purpose for the gifts. The gifts are to be used for the good of the whole community. We are a community of co-laborers and are co-laborers with Christ. I love how the commentator Lee Barrett describes this intent: "Genuine spirituality is not the cultivation of private emotional highs, mystical thrills, or an exclusively individual serenity. Christianity is not a religion of spiritual Lone Rangers or narcissists. Rather than fostering a purely private ecstasy, the [spiritual] gifts are bestowed in order to build up the church. They are intended to be publicly communicable, publicly shared, and publicly enjoyed."³

Spiritual gifts are intended to be publicly communicable, publicly shared, and publicly enjoyed. This follows directly from the diversity of gifts we receive – everyone, I mean everyone - receives gifts from the Holy Spirit that allows them be part of building a realm that reflects the values of Christ.

Like some of you in the congregation, I have been reflecting on the death of poet and novelist Wendell Berry, who died on August 31. While I have read much of his poetry, I have not read much of his prose. One of the books I chose for reading the week I was out on medical leave

³ Lee Barrett. 1 Corinthians 12:1-11. Theological Perspective. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*. Ed. By David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, 2013; p256

was his book *Fidelity*, a compilation of five short stories set in the town of Port William spanning nearly a century. The stories are compelling on so many levels, but what struck me at the core was the place not just of the “land,” for Berry is known for writing about his agrarian roots, but moreover the way community is the vehicle by which healing occurs.

In a commentary about Berry’s death, Norman Wirzba, a professor of theology and ecology at Duke Divinity School and a longtime friend of Berry wrote, “What he [that is Wendell] longed for was the formation of communities in which the care and celebration of all its members, human and nonhuman, might occur. In his poem “The Mad Farmer, Flying the Flag of Rough Branch, Secedes From the Union,” published in *Entries* (1994), Wendell offers this invitation:

*Come into the life of the body, the one body
granted to you in all the history of time.
Come into the body’s economy, its daily work,
and its replenishment at mealtimes and at night.
Come into the body’s thanksgiving, when it knows
and acknowledges itself a living soul.
Come into the dance of the community, joined
in a circle, hand in hand, the dance of the eternal
love of women and men for one another
and of neighbors and friends for one another.⁴*

I’ve been thinking about these words of invitation to “come into the dance of the community” as I have spent time over the last few days reflecting on the 25th anniversary of the September 11 tragedy. For those of old enough to remember, we have shared our stories of where we were when we heard and how we responded. At its meeting last Wednesday night, members of the Mission Committee told their stories and it was incredibly moving.

Nine years ago Brian and I took a mini-vacation to New York City. Amidst seeing of old friends and celebrating my brother’s birthday and taking in the show *Come From Away*, we visited the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. The Memorial consists of two square, below-ground reflecting pools surrounded by waterfalls that begin above ground level. The pools are the footprints of the former World Trade Center buildings. The names of those who died in the attacks are inscribed around the pools of water. It is hauntingly beautiful.

The architect, Michael Arad, who watched the second plane hit the South Tower from his roof on the Lower East Side, described how, in the days immediately following the World Trade Center attacks, he envisioned a memorial that incorporated the element of water. In an article about the design he said, “The way people came together in New York affected me greatly. I thought about my own experience and how important public space is for New Yorkers — a

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/wendell-berry-s-vision-sacred-world>

place where people come together and stand side by side with strangers, where you can feel a sense of community and compassion and stoicism and courage.”⁵

I so appreciate his recognition of a need for a place for people to gather. We gather at the river, at the spring and at the well. We gather as individuals with unique needs, concerns, and fears. And when we gather we become community. What was so striking to me as I stood staring into the pools was that you can see individual strands of water cascading down the sides- individual streams of tears for the loss of a loved one. But by the time the water reaches the bottom, the separateness is lost and it becomes a woven tapestry of water. It becomes a well of faith, where our individual tears are collected together and we share the pain. And from that pain emerges hope because we are not alone. We are part of each other.

In the sermon notes for today’s worship the Rev. Jessica Crane Munoz reflects on the concept of “synergos.” She says, “Synergos is a word used frequently by the Apostle Paul in the New Testament to talk about the work of Christ that we do together. Literally meaning co-laborer or co-worker, it encompasses the sense that we have shared goals and shared values that we are working toward.”⁶

Paul said, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” For the common good. For our shared life. To build up the church. Mr. Rogers said, “Love is people. Needing people, caring for people. This is Love.” And he told us to “Be a Good Neighbor.”

This fall you are going to hear a lot about being “**All In**” at PCO. This is the theme of our annual stewardship campaign as we seek to live out our Journey to 2030 vision, including enhancing our church’s infrastructure to support the vision.

“**All In**” begins with the recognition that each of have been gifted by the Holy Spirit with a unique way to contribute to the common good. We need each and every one of these gifts. It is through their diversity and variety that we will further God’s realm of peace, mercy, justice, grace and love. It through the diversity and variety of our gifts that we will truly be co-laborers with Christ and co-laborers in the faith with each other. It through the diversity and variety of our gifts that we will be community to each other and that we will invite others to join us in community. May it be so. Join me in prayer.

⁵ Susan Gonzalez. Architect for 9/11 memorial tells the story of its creation. *Yale News*. Nov 28, 2012 <https://news.yale.edu/2012/11/28/architect-911-memorial-tells-story-its-creation>

⁶Jessica Crane Munoz. Sermon Notes. Deeper in Faith Week 7: Co-laborers in Faith. Omaha Presbyterian Foundation, 2025.