

**Sermon on “Gifts of the Spirit” by The Rev. Margaret Fulghum Davis**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Athens, GA on March 31, 2020**

First Scripture Reading – Acts 2:1-13

Second Scripture Reading – 1 Corinthians 12:1-13

Today, we celebrate the launch of the church at Pentecost, the day that most reminds us of whom we are called to be, the people of God, formed together into the Body of Christ, the Church. Normally, we celebrate the church’s birthday with cake. We wear fiery red and talk about the ways the Holy Spirit helps us. And Lawd, don’t we all need some help this quarantine. We fly a dove in worship and unfurl red banners to remember the Spirit’s moving on that day. As Pastor Carol reminded us, the Spirit moved in mighty wind, in fiery gifts, in a miracle of mass communication in foreign languages to share God’s mighty deeds of power with immigrants from every corner of the Roman Empire that had settled in Jerusalem. Hearing about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth that had happened seven weeks before, believers repented and were baptized, growing the community from about 120 believers to over 3,000 who devoted themselves to the way of Christ, embodied in what evolved into the Church. On Pentecost, we remember how, the Holy Spirit forged unity through diversity, empowering us to also miraculously break down barriers of communication so that we too can enflame, proclaim, and build up the Body of Christ into what Dr. King called the “beloved community.”

Over the last month, we’ve been studying Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in chapters 1, 13, and 15. Corinth was the cosmopolitan and commercial Vegas of the Roman Empire. It was heavily influenced by pagan cults to Greek gods, which, here, Paul reminds them, could not speak. These cults were led by prophets who worshipped with an unintelligible ecstatic speech as if possessed by the gods. The church in Corinth and their elevation of those who speak in the tongues of angels, emerged from this context. In a relatively short span of time, the church had devolved from that unified Pentecostal community into a complex group of churches planted throughout the Roman Empire. As most every church that has ever existed, the church Paul founded in Corinth was a mix of decent order and hot holy mess. These new converts struggled with factionalism, hierarchy, arrogance, self-righteousness, depravity, and selfishness. As Pastor Ryan reminded us, the Apostle Paul encouraged them that despite all the ways they might try to divide themselves, their shared identity was actually rooted in Christ their Lord, who bound them to one another in unity. Joined into a holy community at Pentecost, they were compelled to live as Jesus lived and love as Christ loved, for love is the sum of the Law. To do that, they should be marked by a different, counter-cultural way of being together, of valuing each other and resolving conflict. They needed to hear each other’s perspectives and honor the Spirit’s moving within each believer. They needed to work together to build up the Body of Christ, even with those they disliked or with whom they disagreed.

In today’s second reading, which bridges those from the previous weeks, Paul educates the Corinthians on those spiritual gifts the Spirit has doled out. He humbles them with a reminder of how easily they were led astray as pagans and appeals to the foundational confession they have all made in the church. “Jesus is Lord” is one of the oldest confessions in the church and one of the few criteria for membership in the PC-USA. I suspect Paul reminds them of this to discourage them from measuring the faithfulness of their sisters and brothers in Christ and assuming the worst. In other words, if they are confessing

Christ as Lord, they are led by the Spirit and part of our community; so stop with all the litmus tests y'all. And by the way Corinthians, he adds, have some humility since your faith is a gift by the Holy Spirit, not something you boot-strapped for your self to elevate your status and lord it over others.

Then, Paul unpacks a non-exhaustive laundry list of different kinds of spiritual gifts – wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, and discernment. He relegates their favorite, speaking and interpreting tongues, to last place. Paul reminds them that the Triune God allocates and activates a variety of gifts, services, and activities, with egalitarian distribution amongst all. All Christians receive them. All spiritual gifts have value and import. Ministry is not just for pastors and elders. Ministry is entrusted to all believers, and all are equipped by the Spirit to build the beloved community. I wonder which gifts the Spirit has gifted you with already? Which may be bestowed upon you in the future? Elsewhere in scripture, we also hear of the spiritual gifts of generosity, compassion, evangelism, administration, encouragement, service, mercy, hospitality, worship, and prayer. In my mind, I see so many of your faces as I read them. How are you stewarding your gifts these days?

Importantly, the Spirit carefully selects gifts to allot to each of us, not for our own private edification, but for the “common good.” Our abilities are unique gifts on loan to each of us from God, who helps us cultivate them to serve the whole community where God has planted us. But since none of us possess all the gifts required to build the kingdom of God, we have to crowd source our gifts, to use them cooperatively in beloved community. My gifts aren't enough. This is why Paul would say that it is very difficult to be a Christian in isolation. If we didn't know it before all this quarantine isolation, we sure know it now. We can't lone-ranger this. We are designed to be in community, in the flesh, or at least virtually right now, and in all the other ways available to us at any given time. We are called to support one another, offering our unique Spirit-given contributions to the Body of Christ we offer to the world. We have to make room for others to discover, hone, and share their unique contributions to our life together. Will we have eyes to recognize the undervalued spiritual gifts others offer the Church? Or will we feel threatened by them because they are so different from our own? If we, like the Corinthians, are biased towards one manifestation of a spiritual gift, might we miss, neglect, or discriminate against all the other types of gifts the Spirit has given, leaving the Body of Christ incomplete?

It's an overwhelming task, truly. But the good news is that the Spirit seems to be the gift that keeps on giving. If we show up ready to listen and serve, to make room for God and others, to be obedient, advocate, and dream together with prayerful discernment, then the Holy Spirit will show up mightily. She will dole out the necessary spiritual gifts, gather us into community, console us, correct us, unite us, inspire us, energize us, embolden us, and empower us to better reflect the image of God, to bring the beloved community that Jesus proclaimed a bit closer to realization here on earth, as it is in heaven. The church's ability to do this determines how Christ is perceived by society as being manifested in the world.

So, what does this really look like today? For us? How are we doing this already? Though you are not in the building, we, the church, have been deployed deeper into the beloved community. We continue to build ourselves up in virtual worship and study, and to serve Athens and the world with numerous acts of loving care in Christ's name. In March, in response to a plea from a home healthcare worker regarding the overwhelming need for masks to protect our essential workers, a duo of our church

members and their colleagues at UGA founded the Facebook group Mask Making for Athens. Like many of you, I have served with them, offering my meager contributions. In a true loaves and fishes miracle, the Holy Spirit has taken all our diverse spiritual gifts, offerings of time, talent, and treasure, and multiplied them to meet the needs around us. With Pentecostal growth, the movement has exploded to 1,252 members. The Spirit has surprised us not only with the response, but also by stretching us in ways we didn't expect. For example, none of the five administrators even knew how to sew, and only one can now. We lean on the diverse gifts of others. In less than three months, by pooling our gifts for the common good, collectively, we have made 13,543 masks and are still going to meet the need. The movement is not only protecting Athens, but building up the beloved community. It serves as a powerful public witness to what we can accomplish together, when our gifts are allocated and activated by the Holy Spirit's propulsion, when we hear the perspectives and concerns of others, discern the Spirit's leading, and make room for everyone to offer their gifts to serve the common good.

But there is so much more holy work to be done. How can we lean further into what Paul is asking of us, in church and in society? In the last few weeks, like the disciples waking up on Pentecost, we have experienced such whiplash, such collective grief. Life as we knew it has been pummeled by a global pandemic that compounds all the other grief we experience. Our loved ones are still dying of COVID-19 and natural causes. Our friends complete suicide. Our businesses are failing. Our budgets are cut and our jobs furloughed or eliminated altogether. Our pantries are empty and bills unpaid. Our doctor's visits and scheduled treatments are postponed or cancelled. Most of our plans have been tossed into the scrapheap. We are lonely or crowded, busy or bored. We are at risk. We miss each other and our old way of life. It's a lot. And then, we have a month of violence that once again unveils the pervasive evil of systemic racism. We learn about the unjust victimization of our own Ahmaud Arbery and of Breonna Taylor, Christian Cooper, and George Floyd. We hear another, "I can't breathe." And neither can we. We hold our breath in shock and horror to see the cumulative loss of so many black lives. We hear testimonies from the families of those slain, from our schoolmates, neighbors, colleagues, and friends, subjected to the persistent traumatic stress of systemic racism. They tell us, like Civil Rights Heroine Fannie Lou Hamer said, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Though its presence does not haunt me as persistently or impact my life as pervasively, I too am tired of bearing the burden of our racial sins, even while I recognize my fatigue cannot be compared to that of the lived experience of people of color. I wonder if one of the reasons we don't like to talk about it is because of our shame and guilt at the pain we have inflicted upon other human beings. All my life, I have searched inwardly to see how I can continue to uproot systemic racism from my heart and life and community. But it is still here within me and around me, subtly and overtly in how I choose to live and move in a world of white privilege, white entitlement, and white supremacy that continues to devalue the lives of people of color. It was there in my strident confidence in demanding a manager on a call with VRBO, when a vacation refund hit persistent roadblocks. It was there when I knew I didn't need to worry too much about finishing my beer at home before we began our neighborhood stroll, at night. It was there in my presumptive suspicion of the car that slow-rolled down my street yesterday, which turned out to just be a black family enjoying the distraction of a drive on a beautiful day. Sadly, I could go on because confession is critical and there are few things more dismissive to people of color than denying the racism that lurks within us all. But truly, you don't need to hear a performative confession of the ongoing transformation needed within me. You certainly don't need a defensive litany of all the

ways I am a “good white person” who has loved people of color and tried to learn more, to do better, to move the needle on racism.

The voice that needs magnifying on this issue right now is that of George Lloyd’s heartrending call for his mama as the breath was suffocated from him. That call for mama should make us all come running, as if it were our own child, because in the Body of Christ, in the beloved community, he is our child too. The voices we need to amplify are the testimonies of people of color and the work they are pleading with us to do, particularly as people of faith, as the Body of Christ in predominately white privileged congregations. So, I hope when you leave here today, you will seek out those voices, those testimonies. I hope you go home and look up “Anti-racism resources for white people” or “75 things white people can do for racial justice.” When I read these, I was so proud to see that our church, our Presbytery, the Presbyterian Student Center at UGA, and all the other places where I have served have a pretty good start ticking down that list. Hopefully, your list is also a work in progress. Personally, I was reminded that I have a lot of catching up to do.

I recognize that the good and faithful and loving people of this congregation likely have a wide range of views on this issue. Some may be hurt, some angry, some comforted, some relieved to hear this Word that the Spirit has laid upon my heart today. I pray we can continue in holy conversation beyond this sermon, trusting the Spirit to bind us together in love. We’ve seen a lamentable number of black lives lost over the years, but something about this moment feels different, maybe because we are all on edge and on social media so much. But it also feels like there is a window for a bipartisan, interfaith, interracial consensus to begin coalescing to fight the worst legacies of systemic racism that continue to endanger black lives. I don’t know what it will look like, but I suspect that, just as our church has in the past, we can be part of whatever the Holy Spirit is doing right now, in the middle of a global health epidemic, to stamp out the hate and injustice that God despises.

I wonder; if the Spirit can pull our gifts together with such speed and efficacy to save lives through masks, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us, what is stopping us, the Church of Jesus Christ, from leading more prominently to combat racism too? Is it that we, this body of Christ gathered in worship, aren’t predominately the ones whose lives are in danger? Is it a failure of empathy, of love, a breakdown of beloved community? Is it too controversial, too complicated? Are we scared of failure? Is the task too overwhelming? Are we worn out from all the other cacophonous battles the church has endured, over desegregation and women’s ordination, LGBTQ inclusion, and partisanship? Do we simply not have the will? Do we not have the means, the practice, or the spiritual gifts to get very far on anti-racism? Do we not know how to start? Isn’t it a little of all of these things? And while most are legitimate concerns that we can’t simply dismiss, don’t they pale as excuses when compared to the suffering being inflicted upon our black brothers and sisters in Christ, which our society dismisses so readily? How can we possibly do this together?

Honestly, I have a hunch, but I don’t know. But, I have good news of great hope for us. Like the demoralized early church gathered on that Pentecost morning, like the fractious Corinthian church that Paul calls into beloved community, we don’t have to be able to see far down the road to begin the journey. We start locally, each person examining themselves, then moving out in concentric circles of growing coalitions...our family, our friends and neighbors and colleagues, our churches and workplaces,

our city and on and on. Today's scriptural lessons teach us of the astounding power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish more than we can even dream. The Triune God wants to help us build this beloved community more than anything, so much that Jesus Christ came to be with us, to offer salvation to all. We, the church, exist to proclaim God's salvific work of restoring creation, liberating the oppressed, organizing our society for the common good, and transcending conflict with ingenuity and faith. It is the work of God unveiled in countless biblical messages and miracles from the God of Moses all the way to Mary and beyond. We saw it enfleshed in Jesus Christ, who showed us the way, charged us as his ambassadors, and sent the Spirit to help us repair the breach, to bring life out of death and hope out of despair. And the Spirit chooses to use us, to call us, to gather and guide the diverse and disparate Body of Christ, and to equip us with all the varied spiritual gifts we could need to advance God's plan to build up the beloved community. We just have to show up with humble and persistent commitment to work collaboratively and courageously, even sacrificially, in the work we can sense that God is already doing in our midst. We can trust the Holy Spirit to show up and do the heavy lifting, the seemingly impossible work of pulling it all together and moving us forward, heart by heart, church by church, city by city with Pentecostal-level miracles in communication and cooperation, until the beloved community grows so big it joins that which already exists in heaven. *By the power of the HS, may it be so. Amen.*

**Benediction:**

*Friends, you have been deployed into the world to love and serve, and to build up the beloved community of God together. Go with great hope in the God who created you, the Christ who calls you, and the Holy Spirit who equips you, binds you together in love, and who will make our work effective, for the glory of God. Amen.*