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A sermon by Brent J. Eelman

Re-Thinking Church: Part II

I Corinthian 12: 12-31a

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts.

Abraham Lincoln, in a message to Congress in 1862 wrote: "The dogmas of the quiet past, are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise – with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, then we shall save the country." I believe that God is calling Christ's church to "think anew, and act anew" so that God can save the Church, and indeed the world that God so loves. We need to disenthrall ourselves from a nostalgic vision that leads to burnout, failure and depression. God is calling us to something new. God is calling for a church to be built around the gifts of its members.

I have three points: 1. The centrality of member's gifts to the work of the church. 2. The nature and importance of a gift. 3. Re-thinking volunteerism.

I

The centrality of gifts for ministry. If we have any idealistic notion that the early church was a happy, irenic community, the church in Corinth should disabuse us of it. They were a bickering, quarrelsome body that was bitterly divided. Name the issue. They were arguing about it:

- Who could be married.
- Who could serve as a church leader.
- Sexual ethics,
- baptism,
- theology, and
- preaching.

Some would brag, "I was baptized by Apollos." Others would say, "I was baptized by Paul." (As if that made any difference!). Hierarchies began to develop. "I can speak in tongues," was the claim of some. "Therefore I am holier than you." Paul had enough. His first letter to Corinth addressed these issues that were pulling the church apart, but more importantly, distracting it from its call to be a community that transforms, indeed changes the world.

Paul developed what I call a "gift based" ecclesiology. We all have gifts for discipleship. We all have gifts for service to the church and God. Each person who is part of the body of Christ; each person who is a member of the church was gifted by the spirit. These gifts differ. They may be skills or abilities that we have known all along. They may be gifts that suddenly become active in the fellowship of other disciples. Peter for example: an ordinary fisherman became a skilled preacher.

These spiritual gifts are given for one purpose: to serve Christ and the world.

II

Gifts. They are important. I love receiving gifts, and I also enjoy giving them. There is something special about a gift. It is personal. It affirms the one who receives it. It makes them feel special and important, (because they are!). Gifts are also meant to be used. I know I get a feeling of inner joy when I see my wife wearing an article of clothing I bought for her as a gift. God enjoys our exercise of the gifts he has bestowed upon us. In the movie, *Chariots of Fire*, the runner, Eric Liddell said this about his running: "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure."

Each of us has received a gift from God. These gifts differ but they have one thing in common... they build up the church of Jesus Christ. I believe every congregation is made up of gifted people. The art of being a church together is using those gifts to build up this body. This makes every congregation different.

I served a wonderful congregation in Philadelphia for 14 years. During that time, we developed some wonderful ministries that were unique and effective because they used the gifts that God had given to the membership of that church. Poland is also a wonderful congregation. It is a congregation of people who have been given gifts from God to use here. There are ministries here that could have never happened in Philadelphia, and *vice versa*. Why? Because we are gifted differently. Churches should not be cookie cutter versions of each other. Each congregation is different, and has different qualities. The challenge is to discover, celebrate the gifts that God has given to you here in Poland. I am convinced that ministry is not a

bag of tricks that will work... ministry is enabling a congregation to discover their gifts for ministry and then encouraging them to use them.

I am going to say ask this as directly and personally as I can. What is the gift that God has given to you for the building up and the mission of this congregation? Some of you know the gifts that God has given to you and use them. I suspect some of you are sitting on yours, perhaps waiting to be asked. Others, might be thinking... "I don't have any special gifts for ministry..." or "I am too old." Or "I am too young." So many gifts within the church lie idle.

We need to do two things: First discern our own gifts... we do that prayerfully, and when we believe we know what God has given to us, we use them... we present them to God, just as we present the offering. Second we need to discern and encourage the gifts in others. Do you know someone here who could be a teacher? A youth leader? Someone who could assist in the office with phones. Someone who might enjoy visiting shut ins. Someone has a gift of organization and might want to take a stab at one of the closets where things are stored. Can we encourage gifts in others? And when they share their gifts, can we show a genuine appreciation of their offering?

One of my observations is that Poland Presbyterian Church has a gift crisis. I know you are a gifted people. I know you are smart, hardworking and informed. But I am also aware how difficult it is to find the people to do some of the things that need to happen... People who can serve on session and deacons. People who can teach. People who are willing to give time to help out with the youth programs, and children's programs. A staff, no matter how talented can't do it all. Think about your gifts... Pray about them.... Use them.

III

Re-thinking volunteerism. One of the tacit dogmas of which we need to disenthral ourselves is the idea of volunteerism. Traditionally we have thought of the church as a voluntary organization. My congregation in Houston had a paid director of volunteers. In my lifetime I have volunteered for a number of civic and community groups and they were important services and gave me a sense of fulfillment and purpose.

Volunteerism implies a choice. "I want to do this, but not that." Or "Maybe later when I am not so busy." The volunteer model may have worked for the church for two centuries, but it does not any longer. Jesus never asked for volunteers, he called disciples. When he approached the fisherman mending their nets, he did not say, "I need some volunteers for the next few years to give a hand with my ministry." No. He said, "Follow me." He called them. We get the word "vocation" from the latin *voca* for "call". The church does not need more volunteers. It need disciples, called by Christ to follow him.

One of my concerns is how easy we have made Christian faith. We have lost the vision of sacrifice, transformation, and commitment. We have lost the cross. One of the Sunday School hymns I sang as a youth was:

Jesus calls us over the tumult
Of our life's wild, restless, sea;
Day by day His sweet voice soundeth,
Saying, "Christian, follow Me!"

Does Jesus still call us? I think so. But I also know that there are a lot of other things calling for our time, our commitment, indeed our very souls. I struggle every day with how the church must accommodate itself to all the other pulls and demands upon our life. Are we not, in the concluding words of that hymn:

Give our hearts to (His) obedience,
Serve and love (Him) best of all.

Let me conclude: The church is not a voluntary, not for profit, organization. In the words of Paul: "We are the body of Christ." *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. God has appointed.... Not asked for volunteers, not given a choice, God has called forth, just as he did the Disciples, Abram and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Jeremiah and Isaiah: 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?'
Can we respond with conviction 'Here I am Lord; send me!'*

Or do we add that caveat of culture.... "Later Lord.. when I am not so busy."