

Mark 2:1-5, 11-12 ~ 1 Corinthians 12 (*selected verses*)
Can You Hear God Calling? Activating our Spiritual Gifts
3rd of 3 Sermon Series: *But I Can't Sing!*

7th Sunday of Easter ~ May 21, 2023

Sunday School Teacher Appreciation ~ Sacrament of Infant Baptism ~ Installation of Officers

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Introduction:

Let us partake in the sacred as we hear from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth concerning spiritual gifts, 1 Corinthians 12. This is the build-up chapter to 1 Corinthians 13, known as the "love chapter." Divine Love is the greatest gift that never ends and never fails. But here is where Paul begins. He starts with the wild and crazy "varieties of gifts." Our focus to complete this three sermon series on Activating our Spiritual gifts.

Meditation:

Do you have the Merlin Bird ID app on your phone? If you love the sound of bird song, but are not an expert Ornithologist, this app is for you. You open it up, and it immediately starts identifying the sounds of all the birds within ear shot. My husband Bob and I were camping on Monday at Council Grounds, and as we were enjoying an early morning campfire at our site, we were delighted and astounded by the thick harmonies of multiple birds singing all at once. Curious about what birds we might be hearing, we opened up our Merlin Bird app and within seconds it had identified seven birds, with their seven different songs. A heavenly harmony beyond description.

What do songbirds have to do with Paul's teaching about spiritual gifts? While epic Olympic gold medalists, like Michael Phelps, or Pro Football Hall of Famers, like talented Jim Brown, the Cleveland Browns fullback who died Thursday at age 87, or Nobel Peace prize winners, or our local high school valedictorians impress and thrill us—these kinds of "gifts" are not quite what Paul was talking about. Songbirds get us closer. So do the four friends of the paralytic man in our first scripture lesson. It took four of them working together. It took their combined muscle, ingenuity, and teamwork. Together they found a way, they made a way out of no way, to get their friend in need of healing to Jesus. They had activated their spiritual gifts, big time, for their friend.

And so does the scene of our thirty-four person FPC crew who showed up yesterday morning at 8 am and blitzed through all the clean-up tasks inside and outside our church building on Gil's clipboard. The crew included children, teens, and adults up into their 80's! A mighty chorus of effort and output: Six different teams: dust rags, vacuums, shovels, squeegees, sweat flying: it was a beautiful thing. So too, our Sunday School Teachers and CE staff we just recognized. And so do each of you, from very small to extremely tall, who made promises to God and baby Josie Amy during her baptism. Still to come, so do the rest of our elders and deacons we will install. These are just a few of our most immediate examples. If Paul were to write a letter to us, *1st Marshfieldians, chapter 12*, he would have all these and more to write about.

Here's my point: When we let God use the song or gift we have been given to bring healing, hope, justice and joy through our little "partial and piecemeal lives" that's it! We are becoming the people, whom God created us to be. Every bird has a song. And every song is different. Paul is explaining and Mark is telling a story to help us see that even if we are not able to carry a tune in a bucket, but we *are* able to carry the message of God's saving grace and unifying love wherever we go.

None of us has the whole message. Each of us has just one piece of the puzzle. One beautiful piece. Like Paul's human body metaphor, every part is essential and made to work together. What if all we had were eyes and no ears, or several mouths and no hands? Or lots of knees and elbows, but no toes or fingers? We were made to be different, *and* to work together: baptized into one body, made to drink of the same spirit. That is the version of the vision that makes visible the indivisible love of God for all creation. Like the hymn we sing, "*All creatures of our God and king, lift up your voice and let us sing.*" Did you catch that? The song isn't "*Some* creatures of our God and king, or *just a select group* of creatures. **All** creatures.

So, whenever we fold our arms and say "but I can't sing," this is bad news. We are grieving God. We are not being humble. No. We are actually committing blasphemy. We are denying and defying the very One who has given us a unique and essential puzzle piece that is now missing. You heard how burying our talents like the man in the parable, leads to death not just for one man, but for all. And not in the next life, but in this one. Burying our gifts keeps our world in hungering, fear mongering, darkness. When we do this, the music stops.

What is music to God's ears? Certainly, the dawn chorus of birds, from the Robin, the Bobolink, and the Meadowlark to the extremely loud wild geese, the squawk of the Sandhill Cranes, and the cawing of the crows. But down here on the ground, I am equally sure that every time we sing our heart's song by daring to activate our own gifts, that is music to God's ears. Any time we build-up another person, helping them to realize that they have gifts to be honored, cherished, and activated—that is music to God's ears. Gifts that evolve throughout our lives: from our first bawling cry to our last dying breath. They grow and develop as we do. Every time we choose to refuse to give up and throw in the towel, every time we choose to keep trying: that is also music to God's ears.

Because God raised Jesus from the dead, because Christ lives: we believe the spiritual gifts in each of us are deeper than our failures. Deeper than all our failures and faults, we experience as individuals, as a community, as a nation. Divine Love is the greatest gift and the ultimate power. The deepest truth. Deeper than partisan divides. Deeper than the quiet desperation lodged in the pit of our stomach. Yes, we were all made different. And yes, we were all made to drink of the same Spirit. Somehow. Some day.

On May 10, 1994, Nelson Mandela was elected President of South Africa. He was the first non-White head of state in the history of South Africa, upending the devastating structural racism of Apartheid in that country. In his presidential inaugural address Mandela proclaimed

this wisdom (written by Marianne Williamson) to empower and embolden every person by calling them to claim their primary identity: child of God. To sing their God-given song.

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 and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

*There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that
other people won't feel insecure around you.*

We are 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 are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.ⁱ

May the ground of our being open wide to reveal the glory of the gifts planted within us.
God and the world are waiting.

ⁱ As quoted in J. Philip Newell, *Echo of the Soul: The Sacredness of the Human Body*, (Morehouse Publishing: Harrisburg, PA, 2000), p. 109.