

March 12, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

## **The Apostles' Creed: "You're Gifted and Talented"**

*Matthew 25:14-30, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 27-31, 13:1*

*Romans 12:4-8, Ephesians 4:11-12*

David A. Renwick

In our sermons just now we're looking together at *basic Christian faith* as we find it outlined in one of the oldest and most frequently used summaries, called **the Apostles' Creed** (see [www.creeds.net](http://www.creeds.net)). And this week – we're looking in particular at the lines in the Creed in which we affirm that we “believe in the Holy Ghost.” (The word “ghost” here is just old English for “Spirit”).

**“I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY GHOST – or HOLY SPIRIT”**

Last Sunday I spoke about the Spirit as the living presence of God, the living ongoing presence of Jesus, not only WITH us, but IN us, empowering us to become the kind of people we could never become without outside help.

As former archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, put it

It is no good giving me a play like Hamlet and telling me to write a play like that – *Shakespeare could do it. I cannot.*

And it is no good showing me a life like the life of Jesus, and telling me to live a life like that. – *Jesus could do it. I cannot.*

But if the genius of Shakespeare could come and live in me, then maybe I could write plays like that.

And if the Spirit of Jesus could come and live in me, then perhaps I could live a life like that.

This is the secret (says Wm Temple) of Christian sanctity. To have him as our example is simply not enough. We must have him day by day and moment by moment as our helper (*DR: inside us*) as well.

And when he enters in this way, he does so, to begin with to change our character – our moral and our spiritual character. It's this kind of character change that the Apostle Paul describes as he writes to the church in Galatia:

In Galatians 5:22-23 he says that “the fruit of the Spirit” is

*love, and joy, and peace; patience and kindness,  
generosity and faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*

This is the character of Jesus himself! – not our own character by nature. And the work of the Holy Spirit is to implant Jesus inside us. Not that we become like him all at once (*though, to be sure, sometimes the change can be dramatic*); but that throughout our life Jesus grows within us

until the transformation is complete when we meet him face to face in heaven: transformed back into the image of God, into the image of Christ in which, and for which we were made.

So the work of the Spirit is a work of “character transformation” (*that theologians call “sanctification”*). But not only that.

Not only does the Spirit want to transform our character, but the Spirit also wants to make us useful in his service, giving us gifts and talents so that we can carry out Jesus’ ongoing work and ministry here on earth.

*“You are the body of Christ”* (the visible presence of Jesus on earth). Says the Apostle Paul (1 Cor.12:27, 7; Eph.4:12)

*“To each,”* he says, *“is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”; for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*

TO EACH!! a spiritual gift, a gift of the Spirit, so that together we can effectively be the presence of Christ right here on earth.

But some people have difficulty believing this: that even with God’s Spirit living inside them – that they could ever be seen as gifted or talented.

In 1978, a Georgia State University professor, Pauline Clance and her colleague, psychologist Suzanne Imes, coined the phrase – “*Impostor Phenomenon*,” which, they discovered, describes significant numbers of competent people who feel like fakes, controlled more by fear than reality, as if they are not gifted and talented at all.

Writing about this phenomenon in the Harvard Business Review, management coach, Manfred Kets de Vries describes it like this:

Despite their staggering achievements, these people subjectively sense that they are “bluffing” their way through life, and are haunted by *the constant fear of exposure*. With every success, they think, “I was lucky this time, fooling everyone, – but will my luck hold? When will people discover that I’m not up to the job?”

*The Dangers of Feeling Like a Fake,*

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries, HBR Sept., 2005

Being controlled by fear can be a terrible thing, leading us – suggests the article – to waste our lives, and to falsely underestimate the gifts and talents that we have. And (I’d add) in the case of Christians, to falsely underestimate the gifts and talents that God wants to give to each of us by the presence of his Spirit.

In fact, this is an essential part of the message that Jesus shares in the story that we call the *parable of the talents* in Matthew 25. This is one of those stories that Jesus tells in which he wants to shock people into action, wake them up, and not let them settle with wallowing in the mire.

So, *in the story*, a master is leaving town and he entrusts his money to three servants. A different amount with each one – *1 talent, 2 talents and 5 talents*.

A “talent” was a measure of weight, and whether in silver or gold, it was no small sum. *In silver – a talent would be worth over \$16,000 in today’s money. In gold – a talent would be worth over \$1¼ million.* And the expectation is that the money will be used in some way –invested in some enterprise that would please the master, and along the way, perhaps make more.

And two of the servants get it! They do this – they step out in faith, not afraid of taking risks, perhaps even losing their investment. They trust their master’s confidence in them and end up doubling what they’ve been given. And when the master returns, they receive his praise.

But not so the third servant! He gets scared, He chooses to believe that his master is cruel and hard (even though we readers of the story know that the master is kind and generous, and praises his faithful servants, wanting their joy). He acts as if he has been given nothing. He chooses fear rather than faith, as if he’s not gifted and talented at all. So he buries the talent entrusted to him in the ground. He puts it out of sight *and only when the master returns, does he pay any attention to it at all, and digs it up!*

**And at this point his fear becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.** The master becomes furious and tells him that at the least he could have put the talent in the bank and earned interest. And then – just to shock those listening to the story – Jesus says that the man was taken away and thrown into the outer darkness!

It’s a chilling end to the story – but there’s no mistaking Jesus’ point: that every single one of us has been given at least one talent (and perhaps far more!) by a generous master, who loves us, and adores us, and wants our lives to be fruitful and effective – and we dare not allow our fears or a false sense of humility, or sheer laziness, **make ourselves less than what God wants us to be!!**

*Which means that the sooner we start figuring out and using our spiritual gifts, the better!* So **“What’s your gift?” – your God-given spiritual talent? What are your gifts? And how do you know?**

Well, finding out is not really rocket science!

Some of us may already know it may be obvious. But if it’s not obvious . . .

(1) Then Step 1 is to **Pray!**

– “*Lord, give me a Gift to use for you, and show me what it is.*”

(2) And after you pray – the next most obvious thing to do is to **Ask A Friend!**

– Sometimes people outside us can see inside us better than we can see ourselves. Find a friend, or neighbor, or colleague and ask – “*What do you see in me? What can God use in my life?*”

(3) Or, then, if you can’t quite pull yourself to do that: **Take a Test!** Take the Strengths Finder test ([www.strengthsfinder.com](http://www.strengthsfinder.com)), or use what we call a spiritual gift inventory, which is a way of discerning what gifts we have from God. There are all kinds of these inventories on the web. A place to start is:

[http://www.flumc.org/files/fileslibrary/congregational+vitality/discipling/spiritual\\_gifts\\_inventory+short.pdf](http://www.flumc.org/files/fileslibrary/congregational+vitality/discipling/spiritual_gifts_inventory+short.pdf):

**Most spiritual gift inventories don’t just come out of the blue. They’re based on four passages of scripture which speak about spiritual gifts.**

(1) 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

(2) 1 Corinthians 27-31, 13:1

(3) Romans 12:4-8

(4) Ephesians 4:11-12

**Some people read those lists** of gifts and they say,

*“You know, none of this really applies to me. I’m not a prophet. I’m not an apostle. I’m not a healer. I don’t work miracles. I hear of Pentecostal churches that speak in tongues but I don’t do that and I don’t want to! In fact, it all seems rather bizarre and strange.”*

And so there can be a temptation to read those passages and move on to some other passages speedily without giving them much thought: as if they had nothing much to do with us.

But let me share with you *two thoughts* that have helped me to read them as still important and relevant for us today.

**The first** is to realize that almost all of the gifts can have both a *spectacular* element and an *ordinary* element; both a *miraculous* appearance and a *secular* appearance.

I don’t doubt for a minute that some people experience miraculous gifts that transcend the laws of science in some way. And sometimes these are desperately needed, especially when science itself begins to be worshiped as a God! But the truth is, that as God runs the universe, He more often than not works within the laws that he himself devised and created, and uses what we see as the “ordinary” (the quotidian) to do his daily work – just as much as the spectacular.

So we need to see, gifts like **prophecy** or the **gift of tongues** not just as abilities to see into the future, or to speak or understand other languages with no training, but as any gifts in which people use their words and voices to speak for God, to speak in public or learn other languages – for God.

- Maybe Wycliffe Bible translators have the gift of tongues?!
- So too, an attorney who uses her voice to defend justice?
- Or a singer who uses his voice to create beauty or declare God’s praise, lifting us up to heaven, like an angel – may well not only have the gift of tongues, but also be a prophet?

And, thinking of another “gift,” while **gift of healing** may draw on the direct intervention of God, it may also be the gift – following years of training – used by a doctor, or nurse to do miraculous things. In fact, sometimes the gift of healing may be even more simple than that:

Some people have what we might call a “healing touch.” Simply to be in their presence is healing, and brings health and strength to those who are weary or weak or broken.

In a wonderful book called “Of Human Hands” (Augsburg, 1994) a priest, Jeff Behrens, tells the story of his daily visit to “Andy’s Diner” near Newark – but “incognito,” not wearing his clerical collar! He writes:

Andy’s had an attraction for all sorts of people: rich, poor, and in between, neat and sloppy, loud and quiet, varied races and religious persuasions. I used to go there alone every morning for about 5 years,

Fr. Behrens watched and beautifully describes Andy’s influence on so many people: a single mom waitress, a photographer, a garage owner – and others:

Many poor people traveled by bus from Newark to the many factories in the area. It was not unusual for some of them to stop into the diner and ask Andy for food or money. He was softhearted.

After a lecture on the meager state of his own resources to his short order cook, Jack, Andy would ask him to prepare a take-out breakfast and would place a five dollar bill on the little tray before Jack would wrap it up. A generosity of spirit filled the place. It was a place in which God himself would have felt at home.

And when Andy died, and the place closed, Fr. Behrens conducted his service.

**So What Spiritual Gifts did Andy have?** He probably would have said “none!” But that wouldn’t have been true. He not only had the gifts of **hospitality** and **generosity** – the door was open wide, the food was good, and the sense of welcome palpable. And though he wasn’t rich, he practiced giving and generosity. BUT more than that he surely also had the gift of **healing**. Countless people over the years found Christ’s healing touch in the diner which became a *hospital for the human soul*! Father Behrens writes:

These people were often forlorn, forgotten, lonely. *They needed someplace where their lives could be given value simply because their stories and troubles were listened to.*

Andy also had an agreement with the warden of a nearby jail. Upon the release of an inmate, Andy told the warden, he would be willing to offer a job in the kitchen until the released person could get back on their feet.

So what we need to remember is that the gifts and talents God’s Spirit gives to us may be spectacular or ordinary; developed by training over the years; or just downright miraculous, appearing out of the blue. ***It really doesn’t matter. What matters is that when any gift or talent is offered to God, it can become an extraordinary vehicle of God’s presence and grace that the Holy Spirit can use to do Christ’s work.***

And, then, briefly, **the second thought** that has helped me understand the biblical lists of gifts is that some gifts we have and need today, *aren’t even going to make it onto the lists at all* – because they hadn’t been invented 2000 years ago!!

Some years ago I attended a conference at a church in Portland, Oregon, and the minister described a group of members, some of whom were housebound and who spent a lot of time talking to each other on the phone – and, along the way, were, no doubt, engaging in some juicy gossip!

When he heard about the group, though, instead of condemning them for gossip, he managed to get to know them and challenged them to use their passion to start a phoning ministry in the church, systematically calling members of the congregation, just to check in.

They had a gift – and he could see it, the **gift of phoning** (which you won’t find in the Bible). And as the church grew to 5000 members this gift became a vital part of their pastoral care

The gift of phoning

    The gift of technology

        The gift of transportation

            The gift of ushering

                The gift of flower arranging

                    The gift of planning

                        The gift of time

                            The gift of turning up – just being there!

The possibilities are endless when the Spirit is at work.  
But the starting point is very definite: it lies with each of us, individually!

WHAT'S **YOUR** Gift?

If you've given your life to Christ,  
And have asked him to come inside you by the Spirit – you have at least one!  
You need to find it, and use it for his glory!  
YOU are gifted and talented. Don't sell yourself short. Don't even dare!

*You are the body of Christ*, says the Apostle Paul. We, together, are the visible presence of Jesus on earth.

*“To each,”* he says, *“is given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”*

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2017 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>  
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800

