**Many Gifts**

**Co-pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen**

**Nutana Park Mennonite Church**

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Scripture: John 2:1-11 – The Wedding at Cana, I Corinthians 12:1-11 – Many gifts in the church

Hymns: *Hymnal: A Worship Book* #304 – There Are Many Gifts

*Sing the Journey* #72 – One Is the Body

Good morning. It’s good to be here this morning, back in the pulpit! Thanks for the warm welcome.

I want to start with a bit of a story. Several years ago, a good friend and I were out for coffee, something we did every month or two. It was a fairly warm summer’s day for Winnipeg, so we were sitting out on a patio overlooking Sherbrook St., not far from downtown. At one point, we were interrupted by a man who was walking by. He was a bit disheveled and seemed to be living with homelessness; he was asking for some change. My friend, who is a social worker and used to conversations with people with mental illness and intellectual challenges, right away knew how to speak to this man and what to say. Meanwhile, another customer at the coffee shop, an older, well-to-do woman came over, clearly worried for our safety as two young women being approached by this man. Since I worked at a coffee shop myself at the time, and was used to coffee shop customers, I knew what to say to her, and I reassured her that we were fine and thanked her for her concern. I was struck at the time that between the two of us, my friend and I were able to use our different skills to diffuse this situation, and prevent an all-out confrontation there on that sunny coffee shop patio. It was really an example of different gifts working together for good. Now where have I heard that before? It sounds suspiciously like a description of the church, doesn’t it?

No doubt we’ve heard a lot – perhaps even too much! – about gifts in the past weeks. I’m sure many of you celebrated Christmas with gift exchanges with family and friends. Last week we remembered the Magi or Wise Ones who travelled a long distance to give strange and symbolic gifts to the baby Jesus. But I’ve been thinking about gifts in this other sense – the sense of skills and abilities and talents – a lot lately. This is in part because – full disclosure - I had my moments this week of wondering whether I still have the gift of preaching. It’s been a while! But also as I reflect on the gift that was my year-long maternity leave. You see, the reason that it was such a gift was because I was able to take time away knowing that this congregation was in such good hands. So many of you stepped forward to fill in various parts of my work during my time away – from Patrick’s almost superhuman energy to take on extra tasks to Sarah and Nora’s willingness to pick up parts of what I normally do, to the committee that formed to lead Women’s Bible Study, to the work of the Worship Committee, Care and Visitation Committee, Adult Ed. Committee, Tammy, Bob, Helen, and others on the board and in committees who have kept everything running smoothly. It’s certainly not every congregation that could have one of its pastors and its youth leader step back for overlapping, year-long maternity leaves and have enough people willing to give gifts of time, energy, intellect, finances, and prayer for the life of the congregation to carry on essentially as usual. But I knew I didn’t have to worry. This truly is a gifted congregation, a congregation with much to share with each other and beyond our community, and one which is good at discerning gifts in its members, even in its pastors.

Our Scripture for this morning invites us to ponder this notion of gifts in the church, starting, maybe unexpectedly, with a story about the discernment of Jesus’ own gifts and ministry. It begins at a wedding in the little town of Cana, close to Nazareth, and we’re told that Jesus’ mother and Jesus and his disciples are all there, celebrating the love of this couple (John 2:1-2). But then, there’s a bit of a disaster – they’ve run out of wine. We’re not told exactly why, but theologian Elizabeth Johnson has a theory that this wouldn’t have been a very fancy wedding. Being from Galilee, the couple was likely from peasant farming families without a lot of extra resources, especially under Roman occupation and Herod’s rule. I would imagine in those days – pre wedding planners or embossed invitations – the entire village or villages nearby likely just showed up at these sorts of celebrations, and the couple simply didn’t have the budget for enough wine for everyone. Johnson explains that “this was more than just embarrassment to the providers of the feast and the couple whose union was being celebrated, though it was certainly that. It was a concrete, painful reminder of the precarious economic situation in which the wedding guests all lived.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Luckily for them, Jesus is in attendance, and he has a plan, right? Well, not exactly. Mary, his mother, has a plan. And he’s not too enthusiastic about it at first. She says to Jesus – and this makes me laugh, cause it sounds a bit like my mom – she says, “They have run out of wine.” That’s it. As in, hint, hint, you know what to do, son. It’s a very pointed statement with a lot of unspoken subtext, maybe even a raised eyebrow. And we can even imagine that she, like all parents, wants him to show this crowd his gifts, to show publically what he’s capable of. She seems to be aware of his ability to perform miracles, and so she nudges him to go ahead and perform his very first public miracle. It’s almost like the parent who wants their child to sing a song in front of everyone at the family gathering, and he’s reluctant, maybe a bit embarrassed and shy. But she’s so proud of what she knows he can do.

Jesus tries to shrug her off – “Mom, it’s not the right time for that!” or, in biblical language, “what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” (v. 4). In other words, Jesus tries to say no to his mom. But this is Mary. We have just seen over Advent and Christmas what this Mary is capable of. This is no meek and passive woman. This is a woman who says yes and gets things done – even impossible things. You might even say she specializes in impossible things. You need the salvation of the world kick-started? She’s your woman. You need a Messiah birthed and raised from infancy? She’s got it. You need that Messiah to step into his leadership role even though he doesn’t feel completely ready? She’ll do that, too. It’s almost like she doesn’t hear Jesus protest, cause she simply goes to the servers and tells them to listen to Jesus’ instructions. And Jesus seems to get over his reluctance pretty quickly and realize the wisdom of his mother’s plan. He has the servers fill six stone jars with water, and when they draw some out, it has become not only wine, but excellent wine, better than the wine they had before that had run out.

To me, the beauty of this story is the way that Mary helps Jesus have the courage to act and take that first step inaugurating his ministry. This is a nerve-wracking moment for Jesus. The text says he’s “revealing his glory” by performing “this, the first of his signs” (v. 11); we might think of it as a kind of coming out, as Jesus revealing to his home community, friends, and disciples who he really is: the Son of God, the one who resembles the God of justice and compassion, the one whose first act of ministry is to make more wine for a poor peasant couple to be able to celebrate their love. Jesus hesitates – is he experiencing self-doubt, a kind of stage fright? I like to think that Mary was a little less abrupt than the text says – that she took the time to reassure him: don’t worry, Jesus, this is the perfect moment. I know you can do this. And so Jesus’ family, his newly-called disciples, and his neighbours and friends get to witness the moment when Jesus reveals the life-giving, justice-making power of the Spirit that is within him.

So if even Jesus needed encouragement and help discerning the right time to put his God-given gifts to use, this means of course that we also need this. At its best, the church can be a place of this kind of discernment, as we try out our gifts and overcome our hesitations in a safe and encouraging space: a community that values us not despite our differences, but because of those very differences that make us who we each are. This is the type of community that Paul describes in First Corinthians 12 – one in which diversity is not merely tolerated, but celebrated for the way it enriches the life of the community. I want to read this passage from a different translation or paraphrase so that we hear its message in a new way. This is from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

God’s various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God’s Spirit. God’s various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God [God]self is behind it all. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful: wise council, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the Spirit of God. . . . You can easily see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts – limbs, organs, cells – but no matter how many parts you can name, you’re still one body. It’s exactly the same with Christ. (1 Cor. 4-12, *The Message*)

Wisdom, speaking, healing, miracles, prophecy, and so on. We might call these gifts by some different names today, but Paul tells us that they’re all equally valuable, and all made sacred as they are used for the good of the community, and beyond. All have their source in the Holy Spirit. “The variety is wonderful,” as it says in *The Message*. Here is where that beautiful image of the Body of Christ originates, reminding us that we are as diverse and unified as the many parts of a body which are bound by muscle and sinew and beat with the same blood. We are one body, with many members.

But we might wonder whether Paul’s lofty metaphor really applies to us ordinary Christians living in very different times today. Here he was, describing the church in very ideal terms before there was proof of how imperfect and fallible and human the church can really be. This was before things like the Spanish Inquisition, the crusades, or more recently, residential schools, and other glaring failures of the church to use its gifts for the common good. Is Paul being a little naïve here about what the church is about, ignorant as he is about the destructive chapters of church history to come? Well, not exactly. Even within the book of First Corinthians, there are already some pretty serious issues cropping up in the church. The early church was not, as we sometimes assume, a perfect community. In this book, Paul has already talked about a division between those who follow Paul or Apollos (ch. 3), an inappropriate sexual relationship (ch. 5), church members offering food to idols (ch. 8), and some church members hogging all the communion food while others go hungry (ch. 11). Does that sound like a perfect church community? No, not by a long shot! With all these failures in mind, we see that the reason Paul had to write about unity and valuing each other’s gifts was precisely because those things weren’t happening in the early church in the city of Corinth.

In her book, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*,writer and blogger Rachel Held Evans talks about the beginnings of the early church this way: “It was, by all accounts, a messy, wild, and beautiful process, riddled with ups and downs and mistakes. . . .[She continues,] when we consider all the messes the church has made throughout history, all the havoc she has wreaked and the things she has destroyed, when we face up to just how different the church looks from the kingdom [or kin-dom of God] most of the time, it’s easy to think maybe Jesus left us with a raw deal.” She even shares that one of her readers suggested a tongue-in-cheek alternate book title: “Jesus Went Back to Heaven and All He Left Me Was This Lousy Church.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

But despite the mess and mistakes and imperfection of it all, Paul – and Rachel Held Evans – don’t give up on the church. They know that at its best, it can be a beautiful thing – a living celebration of unity and diversity, a community that overflows the sum of its parts, a sacred body that spreads the blessing and peace of Christ. Held Evans puts it this way:

“I’m not exactly sure how all this works, but I think, ultimately, it means I can’t be a Christian on my own. Like it or not, following Jesus is a group activity, something we’re supposed to do together. We might not always do it within the walls of church or even in an organized religion, but if we are to go about making disciples, confessing our sins, breaking bread, paying attention, and preaching the Word, we’re going to need one another. We’re going to need each other’s help.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Or in the words of our hymn: “There are many gifts, but the same Spirit. There are many works but the same God. . . .Praise God.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

We know that we here at Nutana Park Mennonite Church are not a perfect community, either. And yet there are gifts that we have as individuals and as a church community that are really wonderful to notice and be aware of. We have the gift of a diversity of ages, experiences, identities, and perspectives with which to discern those perennial questions that congregations face: what does it mean to be church together? What does it mean to continue to discern and nurture one another’s gifts within this church family? How can our diversity work in unity for the common good of our community, neighbourhood, city, and beyond? As we continue to discern these questions together, I invite us to remember that we have a lot to celebrate as we continue to *“be a biblically-based community of redemptive nurture*, worship, invitation to faith, prayer, education, outreach & service in the context of the global church,” as it says in our congregational mission statement. What a gift we’ve been given. Praise God! AMEN

1. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 289-291. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Held Evans, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Hymnal: A Worship Book* #304 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)