

“The Team Player”

In our usual worship setting here at Latimer, I would attract some suspicious glances if I raised my arms during a hymn. Although I went to a college, Oral Roberts University, where people prophesied or spoke in tongues at some of the worship services, if I did this during a service you might consider calling the District Superintendent. Although we are open to the workings of the Holy Spirit, we are not exactly what one would call a charismatic congregation.

And yet, talk of the Holy Spirit seems more frequent in our church context these days. Perhaps it is because our world feels out of control right now, and we long for a power greater than ourselves to swoop in and make it all right. It comforts me to think that” to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” I imagine divinely inspired speech flowing forth, deep healing washing over the earth, mighty miracles fixing the wrongs that seem unfixable.

Sometimes the problems that keep us up at night, yearning for the Holy Spirit, are large and far reaching: gun violence, Washington gridlock, debate within the United Methodist church. And sometimes our desire for a miracle is focused on the realities closer to home: getting over a cold or other sickness, having affordable healthcare, balancing our checkbook, finishing a sermon.

There are times when I feel overwhelmed by the problems of the world. I think many in the church feel the same way. So even those of us with distinctly uncharismatic leanings welcome all the help we can get. Bring on the Holy Spirit!

We hope and pray for the Spirit's power to come down and fix our problems but we sometimes forget that when the power does come, it comes into us. The Spirit gives us the gifts of wisdom and prophecy and healing and interpretation. We must allow the Spirit to work in us.

But how do we allow the Spirit to work in us? I share a story I used two years ago when we honored Sara Blackwell on her retirement. We are now in that time of year in which sports' fans are focused on playoffs. We have just watched a great national championship game in college football with the Clemson Tigers winning the national championship. We will have the Super Bowl in a few weeks. Watching these games reminds me of the time I played football as a youngster. When I was in the third grade my parents decided I needed to play football so I would have something to do in the afternoon after I finished with school for the day. I played for a "midget" team of third and fourth graders which competed in the YMCA league in Greenwood.

After some initial hesitation, I got where I enjoyed the game. During my first year I played on the second string defense which acted as a practice squad for the

first string offense. I knew I would get my chance to start and play games my second year. I had visions of possibly being a running back or even the quarterback. In my mind, I had paid my dues, so I planned to be rewarded by the coach.

When we had our first practice the next year, the coach had us do some tryouts. Those interested in being quarterback took turns throwing the ball. Those interested in being running backs or wide receivers ran sprints. When we had our second practice, the coach named the first team starters and their position. I was named center. Inwardly I was hurt. I had wanted one of the glamour positions. I thought about whether I really wanted to continue playing.

After a couple of more practices, I decided to go to the coach and talk to him about my playing center. I asked him why I wasn't considered for quarterback or running back. He then told me something that surprised me. He told me as center I played the most important position on offense. The center was responsible for getting the offense together to huddle for the next play. The center made sure the players lined up properly for the play. The center was responsible for making sure the play started at the right time. The center got the ball to the quarterback and then immediately had to block the nose guard.

The coach then addressed the gifts I had which made me a center. I was too slow to be a running back or wide receiver. I did not throw the ball as well as others, so I could not be quarterback. He then told me, “You are the smartest guy on the field. This, along with your blocking skills, makes you an excellent center. The center has to be smart.” After he told me this, I felt better about my role on the team and played all season, happily doing my job as center.

Although my coach did not talk to me in religious terms, I learned a very valuable lesson in how the church works as a body. All positions on the football field have value and a purpose for the common good of the team. We tend to give glory to the quarterback or flashy running back when in reality others contribute just as much. Without the center, the play never starts and the hole is not opened for the running back to score the touchdown. The team must work together.

From the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Corinthians we can infer that right from the beginning the church had a hard time coordinating and building up unity, given the diversity of gifts and the abilities of its members. There were plenty of gifts; the problem was how the Corinthians were using them in communal life. The Corinthians were having a hard time working as a team. Those who lived in Corinth had a tendency for claiming status, and there were some in the church there who were exalting themselves over others because they possessed what they

considered particularly prized spiritual gifts. Some claimed that speaking in tongues was the highest or surest sign of being truly spiritual. Not only did this create a division in the church but it made some believe that they were not spiritual enough because they did not have certain gifts.

Before we judge the Corinthians too harshly, it seems they suffered toward the same bias from which many of us suffer; the belief that what is most needed, what is most valuable, is concentrated in the special abilities of just a few people, and therefore there is very little collective merit in the church to be appreciated and coordinated. We look to the great preacher or the talented choir director to be the key to our church's success without looking at the contributions of others.

Paul makes three main points to the Corinthians. First, it is the Holy Spirit who allocates the *charismata* (divine gifts) as the Spirit has seen fit for God's purposes. The Spirit is the source of all *charismata*. The focus in this passage is on spiritual gifts but also applies to what believers are granted in service or ministry or in some general work. What is important to remember is that we are not the source of the gift; it comes from the Holy Spirit.

The second point is that each gift is equally important to the enrichment of the church community. The Spirit allocates the gifts as it sees fit for the church body. The distribution of the gifts has no correlation with the status of the

recipient. As members of the body of Christ, all individuals have equal standing and importance. One gift is not greater than another. Paul emphasizes that the gifts are for the common good of the community and are not to be used as a basis for boasting.

Third, each person should use the Spirit-apportioned gifts as a way of caring for and seeking the common good of the church body. We should value our diversity of gifts. Different persons have different life circumstances, different callings, and different *charismata*. All these differences are appropriate and God uses them for the common good.

How do we apply Paul's concerns about the Corinthians to our situation today? We have officially installed our church officials today and we want them to work together for the good of the church body. First of all, we need to recognize the value of the collective group. In his book The Wisdom of Crowds, James Surowiecki names a bias with which most people live. Most of us, according to him, whether we be voters or consumers or investors or church members, believe that valuable knowledge is concentrated in a very few heads (or maybe just one). We believe that the key to solving problems is finding that one right person who will have the answer. It's like relying on the flashy quarterback to lead us to victory without help from anyone else.

Surowiecki argues that large groups can often be remarkably intelligent and wise, even smarter than the smartest people in them. A necessary condition is that the group includes diverse perspectives. Its members cannot be smart in the same way. Not everyone can be the great preacher. Not everyone can be an expert on stewardship.

We may think of ourselves as quite ordinary. We may not think that crowds or congregations composed of ordinary people like ourselves could amount to much. We may prefer to rely on those who have expert knowledge and special skills to lead us and to lead the church. Paul, though, knew the value of the common group. The Holy Spirit has been poured out upon all of us. The Spirit has given each of us gifts to be used for the common good. We need to be aware of our gifts. Others around you can often tell you your gifts. If needed, take a spiritual gifts inventory which can further make you know your gifts.

Finally, be willing to use your gifts. Be willing to speak out. As long as we hear the voices of those whose perspectives, knowledge, life experience, skills, and gifts are different from our own, as long as we don't try to be the same as one another, as long as we allow ourselves to think independently from each other, there is a good chance that the Spirit will be working among us.

Some thirty years after playing on the midget football team, I ran into one of our halfbacks, Bill Edmonds, in Greenville. We talked about our playing days and he commented, “You were a pretty good center. You used to open some good holes for me to run through.”

As Christians, we don't have to be extraordinary; we don't have to be like each other. We don't need to be flashy. We need to listen to one another and love each other. With the Spirit's help, the church just might be able to make a world of difference. Like the center on a football team whose blocking propels the running back to glory, our ordinary gifts open up our faith to the world.