

“To and For”  
I Corinthians 12:4-11  
Luke 4:14-21  
January 24, 2010

Reverend Christine Chakoian  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

Two weeks ago, we honored the celebration of Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan by renewing our own baptismal vows. We were blessed to have actual water from the Jordan, brought to us by our own Sharon and Jon Bayer – reminding us that our baptism is inextricably linked to Jesus’ baptism. As he was baptized with water and the Holy Spirit, through him we are as well.

Last week we looked at what happened next after Jesus was baptized – in other words, what Jesus was baptized *for*. He was not just baptized to have a close relationship with God. He certainly had that already! No, Jesus was baptized with water and the Spirit to launch him into ministry. What we don’t always remember is that the same is true for us. That is what I want to explore today.

Let’s start by looking at what Jesus set out to do as a result of his baptism. According to the gospel of John, Jesus began his ministry in Cana of Galilee. He was at a wedding, and there was a crisis: the wine had run out. In the Middle East at that time (as today), to run out of wine was a disaster – a stigma of poverty or stinginess or both. It was a sign that there was no joy. Pressed into service by his mother, Jesus had the servants fill enormous empty jars with water, then take a taste to the chief steward. The water had become extraordinary wine. Out of emptiness, Jesus created an abundance, not just of wine but of joy, of life. Which is what the gospel of John says Jesus’ life is dedicated to: “I came,” Jesus said, “that you may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Today we turn to Jesus’ early days of ministry through the eyes of Luke’s gospel. After his baptism, Jesus had been teaching in synagogues throughout Galilee. He was exceedingly well received. When he came to his hometown of Nazareth, he chose a special section of Scripture on which to speak: a selection from the prophet Isaiah. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the

captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” Jesus is baptized, he tells everyone, for the purpose of bringing the good news of God’s grace and love, not just to the fortunate, but especially to those most in need.

Although the gospels of John and Luke may give different examples, both testify to Jesus’ clarity of purpose. He was baptized by the Spirit for the work of preaching and healing, teaching and transformation. He was baptized to bring life, and bring it abundantly.

So what does that have to do with us? As usual, plenty.

Let’s return to the reading from I Corinthians that our liturgist read this morning. In this passage – which we read, by the way, every time we ordain elders and deacons and preachers – in this passage, the apostle Paul reminds us that just as Jesus was baptized by water and the Holy Spirit, *everyone* who is baptized in Jesus Christ has been given that same gift. The Holy Spirit did not just alight on Jesus at baptism – the Holy Spirit has come to us too. That’s what we celebrate every Pentecost, as you remember.

And guess what. Just as the Holy Spirit was poured out on Jesus with a purpose, the same is also true for us. Let’s look a little closer at what that means to us.

In a recent sermon my sister Karen pointed out that all of the spiritual gifts listed in Paul’s letter to Corinth are abilities - things people can do with the power of the Spirit. In fairness, in other places, Paul also talks about spiritual gifts in terms of quality of life: the fruits of the Spirit, he says, include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and so forth (Galatians 5:22-26). Those are clearly important gifts for Christians all to bear. But here in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul is more concerned with the things that Christians *do* as a result of being baptized by the Spirit:

Some teach, some interpret, some heal. It's not the same thing for everyone. One person may be really good at A, but do terribly at B. Both A and B are important, but it's a rare person who can do them both. Kind of like blood types – you are what you are, and each is important in its own way. Some can teach, some can sing, some can work with their hands, some can comfort, some can heal, some can lead. We need a variety of gifts.

We're all there, right – we know that not everybody can do everything. If you're anything like me, you're *painfully* aware especially of whatever *absence* of gifts you have. I can't sing well, I'm not a detail person, and so forth. But if we're honest with ourselves, we also admit that there are things we do well. I'm comfortable speaking in public, for example. And that's all good.

The problem, my sister Karen pointed out –

The problem is that we come to think about these gifts as 'talents', and we let our talents define us. *She's a wonderful musician. He's a great cook.* And those things may be true. But that's not who we *are*. We are children of God, disciples of Christ, born of the Spirit. Our 'talents' aren't who we are, but gifts to use for God's work in this world. We misunderstand our 'gifts' if we define ourselves solely by our talent.

Why is that a problem, you might ask. Maybe some recent research will help explain it.

Writer Malcolm Gladwell – of *The Tipping Point* fame – cites an experiment in his most recent book, *What the Dog Saw*. He writes:

Pre-adolescent students [filled out a test] with challenging problems. After they were finished, one group was praised for its effort and another group was praised for its intelligence. ... [From the moment of praise on], those praised for their intelligence were reluctant to tackle difficult tasks and their performance on subsequent tests soon began to suffer.

In contrast, those who were praised for their efforts did really well. But here's the real kicker: when all the children were asked

to write a letter to students at another school describing their experience in the study, 40 per cent of those students who were praised for their intelligence lied about how they had scored on the test, adjusting their grade upward. ... What the researchers concluded was that these students 'weren't naturally deceptive people ... they simply did what people do when they are immersed in an environment that celebrates them solely for their innate 'talent.' They begin to define themselves by that description.<sup>1</sup>

It is so easy to get sucked into that black hole. We know that it's a problem to be called stupid or ugly and start believing it. But it feels so good to be told that we are brilliant or beautiful, that we start believing those things define us. That's a problem. Our gifts are attributes, they are abilities, yes, but they are not the essence of who we are. We are *children of God*, whether we have these gifts or really are stupid or ugly. Moreover, we glorify God not by whatever gifts we *possess* – and we certainly don't glorify God by comparing our gifts with others'. As the children sang in the introit this morning, we would always be worried that someone else is "smarter, stronger, wittier or prettier." No, we glorify God by *using* our gifts to fulfill God's gracious will for the world. Paul's advice to the Corinthians said it this way: "there are varieties of gifts ... but each of us is given the gifts of the Spirit to use them *for the common good*" ... for the well-being of the world God loves.

Jesus got it. It wasn't so important that his vast gifts included wisdom and courage; it wasn't so important that he was able to heal or even raise the dead. Those gifts only matter to the extent that Jesus *used* those gifts to advance the reign of God. ... that he used those gifts to bring us life, and bring it abundantly.

Forgive me for quoting my sister Karen so much today, but I have one more story to offer. She passed along a story she read about a chef in California who, it seems to her, really gets it about the power of putting our gifts to work. Eight years ago, Tim Hammack was chef of Bouchon, an upscale French bistro in Napa Valley. Now he runs the kitchen at Bay Area Rescue Mission, a 200-bed homeless shelter with a fourteen-month recover program for drug addicts. The reporter writes,

Mr. Hammack grew up in a trailer in American Canyon, a working-class enclave outside Napa. Each day, the school bus to Vintage High School... traveled through vineyards and mustard fields. He went to culinary school, apprenticed at César restaurant in Berkeley, cooked and backpacked through Spain and Morocco and wound up at Bouchon, with a dream job.

A dedicated churchgoer, Mr. Hammack realized after two years that an entire career spent cooking for the affluent would not fulfill him. Today, he leads a double life, spending weekdays at the mission and weekends catering in San Francisco with a company he founded, Bohemian Elegance.

In 2002, the mission teamed up with the local community college, where those who have graduated from the recovery program can go on to a full-fledged cooking school.

At the Christian mission, Mr. Hammack's sous-chefs include Chris Dikes, a former methamphetamine user for whom "the constant hustle," as Mr. Dikes put it, was all that mattered, and food was just something to choke down between highs...

One recent day, Mr. Hammack was instructing a resident, Sat Ly, how to slice through fresh herbs "so that everything stays vibrant and green." Mr. Ly, 35, had worked as a fryer in Chinese restaurants before becoming addicted to cocaine.

When lunch was served — spice-rubbed turkey sandwiches with walnut stuffing, cranberry sauce and aioli — there was the sense of a curtain closing on a magnificent play.

Afterward, Reginald Russell, a recovering methamphetamine user, led the men at the tables in a hymn. “I’m a hard-fighting soldier on the battlefield,” they sang.

“There’s the spiritual food and the physical food,” he said.

All of it, comfort food.<sup>ii</sup>

To each has been given a gift of the Spirit. To each has been given lots of gifts, most likely. Gifts that are not “talents” that define us, but gifts to use *to* accomplish things for the sake of God’s will ... gifts to use *for* the sake of our world.

Which brings us to two crucial questions. The first is this: wWhat gifts has God given you? Have you been blessed with the gift of brilliance or beauty, of the ability to teach or heal? Are you able to host parties with fearlessness, or reach out to a stranger without thinking twice about it? Do you have the gift of quiet wisdom, a listening ear, a compassionate heart? Or do you have the gift of courageous justice, a passion for the poor in Haiti or Africa or nearby? But the second question is just as important: what is God calling you to *do* with them? We all have gifts – but the Spirit has baptized us to put them to work, to the glory of God, and for the sake of God’s beloved world. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Malcom Gladwell, *What the Dog Saw*, pages 365-6, cited by Mark Barger Elliott in his unpublished paper for the 2010 Moveable Feast, and brought to my attention by Karen Chakoian in her sermon of January 17, 2010, First Presbyterian Church, Granville, Ohio.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/14/us/14chef.html?ref=us>

Finding Purpose in Serving the Needy, Not Just Haute Cuisine, cited by Karen Chakoian, January 17, 2010.