

Leaders for the Church  
I Corinthian 12:1-7?  
Acts 6:1-7  
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When I was a young Mom, I learned just how loud a hungry infant can get. For medical reasons, Annie was a bottle-fed baby. She was also colicky and may have been allergic to cow's milk, so we fed her soy milk. I remember one day particularly clearly, when Annie was just a few weeks old. We were living in the city, and went out one Saturday to visit John's Mom in LaGrange. I had a bottle of soy milk with me – I thought it would be enough – but round about two hours into our visit, Annie got hungry again. Really hungry. Have you ever seen an infant who is hungry – and there is nothing to feed them? It is not a pretty sight. Her little tiny face scrunched into what looked like a really, really wrinkled baseball, and she turned beet red, and she opened her mouth to about half the size of her face, and she screamed. And screamed. And screamed. Every now and then she'd stop screaming to catch her breath, and then her little body would be racked by sobs again. It was horrible. Needless to say, we scrambled to the store as fast as possible, and fed our starving baby ASAP.

Two thousand years ago, the world was starving ... the world was starving for God's love. And God heard our cries, and sent his own Son Jesus into the world, and baptized him – anointed him – to go out, as the gospel puts it, to “fill the hungry with good things.”

Jesus' baptism inaugurated his ministry, and from that day Jesus went out, teaching and healing, calling people to abundant life, and exhibiting courage even to the point of death. The resurrection could have been the end of the story. *But it wasn't.* Because God knew that the world was *still* starving for his love, and that Christ's presence was still needed. So the church – the body of Christ -- was born: Christ's followers, baptized at Pentecost with the Holy Spirit, to pick up where Jesus left off: taking God's love to a starving world.

It started with one explosive day – the day of Pentecost, when all the disciples poured out onto the street speaking different languages: Aramaic,

Coptic, Greek,— in languages *everyone* in the city could understand ... in a way that each different person could digest.

And then, as the church multiplied, the gifts of the Spirit multiplied with it. Our first Scripture lesson, written less than twenty years after Pentecost, outlines a vast array of spiritual gifts poured out on the early church: the gifts of teaching and healing, the gifts of wisdom and discernment, the gifts of faith and prophetic speech.

From the very beginning, God blessed the church with many different gifts ... and God baptized every single disciple for the work of sharing his love with a starving world. And if it was true then ... if it was true then, should it not also be true today?

Let's test that theory. Are the gifts of faith still evident? Well, at 9:00, our Confirmation class is being presented: young adults on the road of faith, dedicating a year of their time to study, many of them making their commitment to Jesus Christ and his church. At 11:00, we ordain and install officers for our church. Some will serve as elders, leading our ministries of teaching and mission and worship. Others will serve as deacons, leading us in ministries of compassion and nurture. Later today, we'll celebrate Don Dempsey's ministry among us: his ministry as Interim Pastor, called to walk with our church through times of terrible distress to bring us safely to the other side.

And these are just the Spirit's gifts we're celebrating today. There's plenty more evidence: the gift of hospitality through those who answer phones at the reception desk, or prepare communion. The gift of administration, through those who oversee personnel issues or carefully tend our budget and our buildings. The gift of teaching, through those who teach Sunday School or lead our small groups. The gift of worship leadership, through those who sing or play in the bell choir or band, through those who serve as liturgists or usher or train acolytes. And many, many times over, the gift of selfless service, through those who work Rummage or go on Work Trip or raise money for mission or cook meals for Soup Kitchen or tutor children or volunteer with the homeless or serve on Boards of Directors for agencies.

There is also, of course, the ministry of some great pastors that the Spirit has brought to our church. But even the wisest most eloquent pastors could never begin to sustain the whole ministry of the church. Think for a minute about how you were fed with the love of God. Maybe like me, long before you ever heard a sermon, you remember Grandma telling you Bible stories, and Sunday School teachers teaching you songs about Zaccheus and Fishers of Men and Yes, Jesus Loves Me: people who spoke in the language of early childhood so that you could understand God's love at your own level. Or maybe, like me, in the midst of your young adult doubts, there were college professors who took you seriously and spoke to the issues of faith intellectually. Or maybe, like me, in your saddest and loneliest times, it has been your family and closest friends who have been unreasonably patient with you. Or maybe, like me, you have experienced the love of God in the kindnesses of the church and even of strangers – as I did when Mom was in her last months in the nursing home, through Kent Kinney's visits to my parents, and the Prayer Shawl sent by our knitting circle, and the kindness of the Nurse's Aides, how they would come so close to my mother and smile so lovingly and gently take her hand, and my mother would beam in response to their affection. Maybe, like me, over the course of your experience in the church, members have brought you to tears with their stories of God's love in their own lives ... and leaders have brought you to your knees when they had the wisdom to speak the truth in love when you've been wrong.

In God's economy, every gift matters. As long as there are people in this world who are starving for God's love, God will be blessing us with the Spirit's gifts, baptizing us with the Spirit's power, sending us out with the Spirit's generosity, tending the internal needs of the church with the Spirit's wisdom, until every child of God is fed. Because God cannot bear to see his children starve.

As it was in the earliest days of the church, so it still is today: as long as the world is starving for God's love, God will keep filling his church with gifts to share. And everybody's gifts are needed, every single offering that strengthens the life of the church. And God will provide for the challenge of this day.

And there *are* challenges today, just as there have always been challenges facing the church. Our reading from the book of Acts reports one of the first squabbles in the church over money – how funds were spent on the care of impoverished widows. The early church didn't pretend there weren't problems – they faced them head on, appointing Stephen and six others to distribute the goods fairly. A cross between Finance Committee and Deacons, they were entrusted with bookkeeping and feeding the poor within the church ... which freed the apostles' time to tend to the main agenda: not serving meals, but serving up the Word of God to a world starving for grace.

We'd be fools not to address our challenges head-on. This is what I'm seeing: the sanctuary choir is vigorously recruiting new members to lift up the praise of God. As our family ministries grow, our children and youth are in need of more Sunday School and confirmation teachers. This last year we inaugurated small group Bible studies – we will need even more group leaders this next fall. Our Stephen Ministry is searching for new people who feel called to provide one-on-one spiritual care for those who are going through a difficult transition or illness or loss in their lives. Rummage needs more sorters when it reopens this week – the volume of donations and the need for low-cost goods in this economy is staggering.

And then there are financial needs ... major financial needs. I went to Finance Committee on Wednesday night, and was stunned to discover that we are on the road to being \$300,000 in the red this year. It's not for lack of diligence. Our financial advisors have done extremely well this first quarter, in spite of the jittery Dow. Our Buildings & Grounds Committee is obsessively making every dime count, even though our energy and snow removal costs skyrocketed this year. Our Personnel Committee is recommending that we trim staff costs; rather than seek another pastor for Don's position, we will revamp it as a Director-level job, and most likely delay hiring to save funds. As for 750, the building we own next door, Finance Committee has for some time been diligently searching for a renter; in today's market, it is simply difficult to find. Yet even while our leaders are diligent stewards of our resources, your gifts ... your gifts are needed.

How much do you need to give? As any southerner will tell you, the goal for Christian giving is the tithe – one tenth –or the modern tithe -- five percent to the church, and five percent (or more) to other charities. That may be more ambitious than you can imagine for yourself ... so let me offer some other measures. Word on the street is that the per capita giving in this church is *lower* than it is in Waukegan -- not just the proportion but the *actual* per capita giving. Or maybe this rule of thumb will hit home: if you're spending more on golf than on God, you might want to take a good look at your priorities. What you decide is between you and God, but as for me and my household, this is not rocket science.

The mission of our church ... it matters so very much. There are older adults who depend on our visits, and homeless families who depend on our food. There are searching college kids who long to know the Lord, and there are privileged youth who are transformed by Work Trip. There are people sitting here today who have wanted to know that they belong, and their small group Bible study was the first place they could really share their faith and doubts and struggles and joys. And there is a world out there ... a world out there that is starving for the good news of God's love. And we, we are the ones to feed them.

Hear these words of St. Teresa of Avila, and may it be your charge now:

**Christ has no body now on earth but yours,  
no hands but yours,  
no feet but yours,  
yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion  
is to look out to the earth,  
yours are the feet by which He is to go about doing good  
and yours are the hands by which He is to bless us now.**