

Core Strength Sermon Series
Engagement - I Corinthians 12:1-11
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Y'all remember Covid? That was a heck of a thing, wasn't it? In some ways it feels like a lifetime ago, in some ways it feels like yesterday. We all had our emotional low points during the pandemic; for me it was every Thursday evening, when Griffin Allen would meet me in this sanctuary to prepare the Sunday worship video. He'd set up the camera about five feet in front of the pulpit, hit the record button, and I would preach my sermon to an empty sanctuary. There was no more surreal feeling than that, although I got about the same amount of laughter as I do now.

I know some pastors who struggled with this so much that they had cardboard cutouts made of congregation members and sat them in the pews so it looked like there were real people out there. One of my friends even had a cardboard cutout of a person sleeping, but I thought that was a bit too realistic. While the people weren't real, they did take up space and made it feel like the church was full.

I'm thankful that today, the church has real people back in it. But, I also wonder if there's any correlation between the concept of cardboard cutouts and our core value for today, which is engagement. Our Faithful Plan says engagement means "Every person is called to use their gifts to serve God and minister to others." Not some people. Not most people. Every person. If we're not doing that, if we're not using our gifts, are we just cardboard-cutout Christians?

The idea that everyone has a gift to use is the thrust behind today's passage. The people in the Corinthian church needed to hear this message because they were starting to create a spiritual gifts hierarchy, believing certain gifts were more valued than others. Some of the gifts the church members had were the kind that received more attention and notoriety, like speaking in tongues, and some of the influential folks in the Corinthian church were beginning to look down upon the people whose gifts weren't as glamorous or sensational as theirs.

What Paul is fighting against in the Corinthian church is the human tendency to value individuality over community, something that's run rampant in our culture. This was captured for me in a series of commercials a few years ago featuring Leon, a fictional pro football player who was the epitome of individuality. In one commercial, after his team loses, a reporter asks for Leon's reaction. He says, "Football is a team sport, so I've got to put the blame for the loss squarely on the shoulders of my supporting cast. I've been carrying these guys the whole season but I can't do it all." The report follows up: "So your four fumbles weren't a factor in the loss?" Leon replies, "Not if one of those other guys would have jumped on the ball. Leon can't do everything." The commercial ends with the reporter saying, "There's no 'I' in team," and Leon says, "Yeah, there's ain't no 'we' either."

What the Corinthians seem to have forgotten is that spiritual growth is a team sport. There's no "I" in church, but "we" are the church and we are called by God to be the body of Christ together, sharing our gifts and honoring the gifts of others that have been given them by the Holy Spirit, regardless of how the world judges their worthiness. The Corinthians were saying that those who spoke in tongues were somehow more important than people who possessed other gifts. Under their rules, a lot of people wouldn't have made the cut to be on the spiritual all-star team.

I've told you before about Pat Garlich, a member of my last church whose job it was to bring the communion bread every Sunday to church. She wouldn't have made the cut. Neither would Perry Grace, who organized the church work days to take care of the grounds. Or Pip Gledhill, who cooked the meals on all the youth mission trips. Our Judy Mankus, who put together our church newsletter. None of them were good enough for the Corinthians. The people who light the candles before worship, the people who count the offering, the people who help stock the Blessing Box. For the Corinthians, they were second-class churchgoers.

But not for Paul. Throughout his letters, Paul lists all kinds of gifts that are needed for the church to be who God is calling it to be. Some are more supernatural, like miracles and tongues; some are virtuous, like wisdom, helping, giving, and service; and some are leadership-based, like teaching and administration. The nature of our gifts is that some are going to be more visible than others. The gift of working miracles may draw more attention than the gift of cooking a fellowship dinner, although I would argue they are one in the same. The gift of administration may not be the most glamorous gift but is no less important than the gift of preaching. Paul is trying to help the Corinthians see that the church is more than just a collection of individuals. The church is a community with a variety of gifts, some more visible and some more behind the scenes, but all with a significant role to play in the church. The church needs everyone to be engaged.

The Corinthians had the problem of discriminating against each other, but I've never heard anyone here at Crestwood put someone else down for their gifts. No, I think our problem is that we discriminate against ourselves. We convince ourselves that we don't have a gift or that our gift isn't good enough, and that we're doing enough by just filling a pew on Sunday. One commentator called that "fearful inactivity." That's the kind of person who wears a belt and suspenders, just to be safe. Better to not do anything than to do something and risk messing up, right? But that leaves no room for God's grace and our own growth. And it squanders the gift God has given you.

So how do you know what your gift is? There are all kinds of spiritual gift inventories and diagnostic tools to help us discover our gifts. But they didn't have those things a thousand years ago. So how did those people learn what their gifts were? They simply tried out different things until they found something they liked and that they were good at. Tada! There's your gift. And if you try it and don't like it, then it's probably not your gift.

For example, some of us have the gift of teaching, and God has given those folks the tools they need to exercise that gift, like an abundance of patience. I remember in seminary when I walked in to teach my first youth group Sunday School, I saw my class was made up of eight sixth-grade girls. I soon realized that God hadn't equipped me with the gifts of teaching a class of eight sixth-grade girls. But for those who are patient and can relate to sixth-grade girls, teaching them is their gift.

When we're trying to figure out what our spiritual gifts are, one of the questions we can ask is, "What has God given me in abundance? What do I have so much of that I have no other option but to share it?" We all know people who always know the right thing to say when we're down, who always make a point to congratulate us on a job well done. God has equipped them to use their gift of encouragement. We all know people who have been blessed with the time and energy to give to helping others. God has equipped them to use their gift of serving. No one has all the gifts, so we need each other in order to do God's work together. We need to be united in our work.

Unity is an important word in understanding how we are going to live this out at Crestwood as we move into the future. Unity does not mean uniformity; God has brought us together because of our diversity, not in spite of it. As one of your ministers, I bring certain gifts to the table, as do our other ministers and support staff. None of us have the exact same gifts. There will be things we do well and things we don't do well. I can prattle on but can't draw my way out of a paper bag. I know people who are great cooks but make babies cry just by looking at them. Thankfully, we don't have to do everything. That's God's way of insisting that we work together, and as we move forward, that's what God is calling us to do, to engage in this holy work together. It's as if we've each been given a piece to a larger picture, and it's only when we put our pieces together that we can see the full image of God's kingdom among us.

So why are some folks still cardboard-cutout Christians? Maybe we're afraid of using our gift because we think we'll use it wrong, or that our gift is so inconsequential that it doesn't matter, or that it won't make a difference, or that someone else's gift is a lot better than ours. To which Jesus says in his most loving, pastoral voice, "Get over yourself." At the end of our lives, when we settle our accounts with God, God won't ask us, "So, why weren't you more like Billy Graham? Why weren't you more like Desmond Tutu?" No, God will ask us, "So, why weren't you more like you?" God will say to you, "I created you to be you. I gave you gifts to be you. Why weren't you more like you?"

We have created an ambitious Faithful plan, so we've got a lot of work to do here. It's way more than a few people can do, so that means we're going to have to work together. I need your gifts. I need you as a partner in this work, as a co-laborer for the kin-dom. I don't care what your gift is. We have people to greet, non-profits to serve, newsletters to mail, donations to count, shut-ins to visit, choir anthems to sing, worship services to plan, classes to teach, tables and chairs to set up and put away, prayers to offer up. I and your staff can't do that all by ourselves. We need you.

We don't light a candle to make the candle more comfortable; we light it so that it will do what it was created to do, so that it will give light. God didn't give us the light of Jesus Christ so that we could spend the rest of our days filling pews; we've been given that light so that we can let it shine. Yes, we were saved by Christ, but I believe we were also saved for Christ, to be his servants for the world. Why deprive the others of the gift you have? The church, the community, the world needs your gift. "Every person is called to use their gifts to serve God and minister to others." So, let's get to work.