



One of the early television programs I watched with my Dad and my brother was *The Lone Ranger* starring Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels. It started in the 1930s as a radio program and developed into a television series in the 1950s. Subsequently there have been several movies. One reason *The Lone Ranger* appeals to Americans, especially, is the idea that we can, as individuals, make a difference in the lives of others. We can fight for what is right. Justice can triumph at the end of the day. We live by ethics and faith that call us to act for justice, mercy and peace.

The term “lone ranger” in contemporary usage means someone who goes it alone without consultation with, or the approval of, others. Lee Barrett reminds us that “Christianity is not a religion of spiritual lone rangers or narcissists. Rather than fostering a purely private ecstasy, the gifts [as mentioned by Paul in Corinthians] are bestowed in order to build up the church. They are intended to be publicly communicable, publicly shared and publicly enjoyed.”¹

This is one difference between our vision of the church as community and some of those who claim they are “spiritual-but-not-religious.” For many of those spiritual-but-not-religious persons, they do not see the need for a community of faith to both support them and to hold them accountable. This is disappointing and not what we find in the Bible. And, if you think about the radio and TV shows, even the Lone Ranger wasn’t alone. He had a faithful companion created some time into the series so that the Lone Ranger would have someone to talk to!

The issue is not time alone. Indeed, Jesus spent 40 days alone in the wilderness following his baptism. Jesus spent time alone in prayer. Many great spiritual teachers spent considerable time alone. Retreats can offer refreshment and renewal, especially when life closes in around us. The issue is not taking time alone. Some of the best writing and meditations on faith and life with Christ come from those who set themselves apart for a time. The great mystics found wisdom valued even today. But they operated within the community of faith of their time.

So the issue is not time alone. Rather, the issue is what we can learn and how we can grow when we are part of a community of faith. When the whole becomes more than the separate parts.

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 256.

Paul must have torn his hair out, at least now and then, with the church in Corinth. He begins the First Letter to the Corinthians reminding them that they are called by be saints, *together with all* those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 2).

Paul recognizes that even in the best of families- the best of churches- there are divisions from time to time. However, he appeals to them to be in agreement with no divisions among them and that they be of the same mind and same spirit (v.10). For when the church is one, great things are possible. As Bishop Cate has reminded us, we are not called to like each other but we are called to love each other. We cannot continue to be the church with a mission to spread the Good News of God in Christ if we can't even sit at table together.

This last week the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, hosted a meeting of the heads of each of the groups within the Anglican Communion together at Canterbury. There is real concern about whether the Anglican Communion can hold together as a Communion. In an interview, Archbishop Welby said that if there is a schism, it would be a failure but not a disaster because:

God is bigger than our failures; but it would be a failure. It would not be good if the Church is unable to set an example to the world of showing how we can love one another and disagree profoundly; because we are brought together by Jesus Christ, not by our own choice.²

What may hold the Anglican Communion together is what Paul wrote and we read in First Corinthians. Part of what enables the church to be more than the sum of its parts is the granting of spiritual gifts. Paul does not want them to be uninformed and so he reminds his listeners that gifts come to every person and are gifts of the Holy Spirit- not gifts that we human beings are responsible for creating. We talk about this as “God-given gifts” recognizing that God is present with us, and active in our lives, even in the 21st century.

Paul is clear, though, that gifts vary and that every single person has one or more gifts. *No one is left out*. Ours is not a tradition that requires evidence of any certain spiritual gift in order to be a member as is true with some. In the Episcopal Church, all people – and all gifts- are welcome. We are all needed for the body of Christ to be what it is called to be – a witness to the love of Christ that transforms lives.

There are varieties of gifts and there are varieties of service. There is, however, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. There is one God that activates each gift in each person. We, then, are less than we are capable of being when we do not welcome each and every person that we come in contact with – when we do not invite them to be with us as members of the body of Christ. When we do not invite and encourage them to share their gifts with us for the benefit of the community.

We are to use our gifts when they are needed, which may or may not be when we wish they were needed. Our gifts are not ours to control – our gifts are given to us by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the realm of God.

² <http://www.anglicannews.org/news/2016/01/archbishop-welby-schism-would-be-a-failure-but-not-disaster.aspx> (1/13/16)

Raewynne Whitely says that “gifts are not merit badges for holiness or a sign of approval from God, but God’s response to the needs of our communities.”³ Our gifts are most fully useful when we are in community seeking to do the work of the Lord. She admonishes us that the “list of gifts is just a beginning place...Such gifts can be a source of disunity when they become criteria for determining different ranks in the church, leading to a hierarchy of holiness.” In fact, listen to our catechism:

Question: who are the ministers of the church?

Answer: The Ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests and deacons (BCP, 855).

That means you and me – every one of us is a minister of the Church. Each of us has been given gifts to be used for the common good. None of us escapes God’s call on our life.

The catechism continues:

Question: What is the ministry of the laity?

Answer: the ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and his Church; to bear witness to him wherever they may be; and, *according to the gifts given them*, to carry on Christ’s work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship and governance of the Church.

Question: What is the duty of all Christians?

Answer: The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; to come together week by week for corporate worship; and to work, pray and give for the spread of the kingdom of God.

We are not to be lone rangers, off on our own quest without responsibility to others or without accountability for our actions. Similarly, we need to acknowledge that we can disagree, even disagree most profoundly, and remain the church with a common mission: to go and make disciples of all the world. To offer the love of Christ to each person with whom we come into contact.

Yes, we each have gifts – and the list today is not the only list of gifts. Paul and others list gifts in various places in the New Testament and other early church writings. But, such lists are by way of example and not by way of exclusion. I suspect the gifts contained in any one list have more to do with what Paul and other early church writers knew about the particular community than any attempt to define the parameters of gifts that could be given by the Holy Spirit.

In two weeks, on January 31st, we will hold our Annual Meeting. We will elect and welcome new leaders to the Vestry even as we celebrate those whose term is ending. We will reaffirm the gifts given by many. The Vestry will begin, in a more formal process, of discerning where we are going – where God is calling us to go- in 2016 and beyond. This is a process that looks back and looks forward. What ministries might we be called upon to celebrate and put down- ministries have a life cycle as do living creatures. As our membership changes- some leave and new people come- the gifts and talents within our parish changes. As our culture changes, some needs recede

³ Feasting, 259.

and some needs come to the fore. We are not static. The ways we have done things in the past was good for that time but may not be what we need now.

As you consider your place at St. John's, think and pray about what gives you joy. What, when talking to another person, energizes you: your face lights up, your voice evidences energy, you are ready to go and do. That is a sign of your gift. Frederick Beuchner said that "the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁴ That place is where your gifts are most wanted and needed for the building up of God's realm on earth. Sometimes it takes time for gifts to develop, so don't be afraid to put an idea out to us; maybe we will embrace it right away or maybe it will take time to develop or maybe it isn't the right idea for this parish. Conversations, though, can have wonderful outcomes if we remain open to the Holy Spirit.

Take Paul's list of spiritual gifts as a starting point and expand on it. What gives you joy? Where are you most at home? Where is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet? Then, when you have found that place, look for how that gift can be used here at St. John's. There is a place for you. We need you. *Amen.*

⁴ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/140448-the-place-god-calls-you-to-is-the-place-where> (January 19, 2013)