

## Discovering Your Own Gifts For The Christ child (Epiphany)

Merry tenth day of Christmas. Christmas is twelve days long. From Dec. 25th to Jan. 6th. In the Western Christian Church based in Rome, Christmas begins on Dec. 25th. In the Eastern Christian Church based in Constantinople, it begins on Jan. 6. So which of the two days should we celebrate the birth of Christ? Dec. 25th or Jan. 6th?

Today, in our church family, we are celebrating Epiphany Sunday. Our focus is the story of the three Wiseman, the guiding star, and their giving of gifts to the Christ child, their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Our *particular* focus today is on giving *our* giftedness, *our* gifts, to God. *Each of us has a set of gifts that we give to God.* Let me explain by means of a story.

How many of you watched the Rose Bowl this year?

That is what this Sunday today is all about: about *us* giving *all* of our gifts to God.

Today is Epiphany Sunday in our congregation, and we focus on the story of the three Wiseman. Now, most congregations don't celebrate Epiphany Sunday *every* year as we do here at Grace Lutheran. Why? Well, I just like the themes and hymns for Epiphany Sunday, and to celebrate it once every seven years is not enough. And besides, the original candlelight service is not Christmas Eve but Epiphany Eve which focuses on the light overcoming darkness. So, we *never* celebrate the Second Sunday After Christmas; for us, the Second Sunday After Christmas is *always* Epiphany Sunday. So every January, we approach the story of the three Wiseman and have to come up with a new sermon. Well, this year focuses on giving the gifts that God has given us.

What are the gifts that God has given to you? They are your talents, abilities, aptitudes, events that have happened to you. These have shaped you, your family, your health, your everything. Your gifts are the sum total of all the resources that God has given to you. Your gifts are *not just* genetic abilities and natural aptitudes, although these are part of your gifts. Many of your most precious gifts are qualities and resources that have been developed in you over time.

God has given everyone in this room an abundance of gifts. Here in my hand, I have a bare stem from a grapevine; it has three grapes on it. You know when you see this stem that it is an anomaly. You know something is wrong with it; that someone has taken the grapes off of it. But here in my other hand, is a large cluster of grapes and there must be a hundred, more than hundred grapes on this stem. You know that *this* is the way that God makes grapes, in *large abundant* clusters. That is the *same way* that God makes all human beings, with large clusters of talents, abilities, aptitudes, and resources. God is enormously generous with each one of us. Let me illustrate.

I talked with Chris Kramer this past week, our youth director, and asked him what were the gifts that God had given to him. He, like all people, hemmed and hawed about the question and didn't want to answer because it may sound like bragging. I persisted and he finally was willing to share. He has what I call the "M & M" personality. He said that he was good at *motivating* groups of people, of being enthusiastic for ideas, of selling ideas. That is true about Chris, he is a good motivator of groups of people. He also said he had the gift of *music*. If you have heard Chris on the guitar, piano, or sing, you know he has that gift. If you hear our new Generation X rock band, you know that Chris can motivate kids into music. He said he was good at *managing*, and I have seen him manage large numbers of kids successfully. Also, God gifted him with *mechanical* abilities. If you see Chris driving his old Volkswagen bus with his ever-resent tool chest, you know he needs to be mechanical to keep it running. I asked to speak to Heidi, his wife, and asked her about gifts that are inside of Chris. She mentioned that Chris is a great husband and has *learned* to be a good listener; that he wasn't very good at listening in their early

marriage, but has learned it. So it is with many gifts; they are not merely natural abilities but *important qualities we learn over time*. In other words, picking up these two clusters of grapes, God created none of us with a few gifts but God has created all of us to be like this large cluster of abundant grapes.

So I talked to John O'Neal, fellow pastor here at Grace, and asked him the same question as Debbie was standing at his side. John, quickly glancing at his wife, said, "The best gift that God has given to me is my wife and children." Smart answer. And true. Some of John's great resources are his wife and children. Knowing his family, we would all agree. Debbie quickly added that John is good is plumbing; he can fix anything. John went on to say that a gift is his genuine caring for others, his compassion that runs deep. And where does that come from? Is compassion a genetic trait? I think not. I would guess that John learned his compassion when his mother died of cancer when he was a teenager at home, and his father at that time was in prison. Who is to say how God transformed the life of this young teenager through the death of his mother when he was quite alone, facing the world. Debbie added: people tell me he is good at one on one relationships in the hospital and that he will give you an unusual degree of objectivity if you go to him for advice. I would quickly add about his integrity; John is wonderfully a true and genuine person. So here is John O'Neal, so very different than Chris in the blend of gifts that God has worked in him. And like this cluster of grapes in my hand, his gifts are many.

So I put myself to the same question and ask myself what are the gifts and resources that God has given me. First, God gave me a wonderful mother, as many people would say. From her I learned a loving zest for life, an energy, an aliveness in all aspects of life. Most importantly, I learned how to do family-love, as do all of my siblings. From my father, I learned how to work hard and effectively. From him I learned that some people work hard but *not* effectively; there is a significant but subtle difference. There are gifts and resources that happen to you depending on your birth order. There are advantages of being first-born, middle child, or last child. I am younger than my siblings, enough so that I am like an only child, and for me this is a source of much creativity and coloring outside the lines. Yes, somewhere I received the gift of preaching. Every week, I compose a song, that is, a sermon, and every week, I make music with it, which is a different gift. The creating and delivering of sermon thoughts are two different gifts. The other day, I was at a funeral and heard a gorgeous soloist. I said to him that when I get to heaven, if allowed, that is the gift I will ask for. The point is: we are all abundantly blessed with a variety of gifts; and our blend of gifts are all so different. This is clearly revealed in the different sets of gifts that God has given Kris, John and myself.

Mary Schramm has written a book entitled, *GIFTS OF GRACE*, and I will refer to it for much of this sermon. She suggests that there are five steps in ascertaining and using your gifts, and I would like to walk through those steps with you.

The first step is to discover your gifts, and you always discover your gifts in **relationship**. You rarely or never discover your gifts in isolation. For example, the essence of all good parenting is to help your child discover his or her gifts. Yes, we love them and give them stability, but part of the genius of good parenting is to help kids to discover their own unique talents and resources which are personally their own. The great temptation of parents is to impose one's own values on which gifts a child should have rather than for them to discover their own. Another relationship in which to discover your gifts is all school, with teachers and coaches and conductors and peers. The purpose of education is not only to acquire knowledge of subjects, but to get to know oneself and the resources within oneself. That is the essence of good education. We also discover our giftedness while at work. Our fellow employees help us as we mature in our talents and abilities. And certainly marriage is a place where you discover your giftedness. In a good marriage, a spouse is forever helping you to discover your talents and how to use those talents most effectively, from the time you are first married until you die. For you are forever growing and changing, and a good marriage partner is one who helps you to discover yourself and what you want to do next with your life. Friends also help you to discover yourself. For example, my wife.

Years ago, after doing the homemaker job for several years, decided to go back to work outside the home, and like so many people, she took an aptitude test to see more systematically what her preferences were. "Reading teacher" came up high on her chart, and so she went and became educated in that field. Time has gone by and she is now ready for another change. She has been listening to our adult speakers on prison ministry and has been thinking about that. The other day in the newspaper, there was an article about teaching inmates at prison to read children's books into a tape recorder and sending that recording to their children. When Jan went to visit a friend, Joan Anderson, the other day, Joan had seen this article and cut it out for Jan. Now, that is a good friend. They know your interests and resources and changing circumstances of life and they help you to discover and expand your giftedness. ... So the first step is to discover your gifts, and this usually happens in a variety of relationships, and this discovering and developing of your giftedness usually continues throughout your whole lifetime.

The second step is to accept the gifts that God has given you. This is the art of maturity, learning to accept the gifts that God has given to you and *not* given to you. A key thermometer is how jealous and envious you are of other people and their gifts. If you are jealous and envious of other people's giftedness or feel inferior, chances are you have not really accepted your own blend of gifts that God has given to you. For example, throughout my whole life, but especially during college years, I was always envious of people whom God had given more brains, so they could go to medical school, dental school or engineering school. These were the smart ones and I always felt dumb and inferior around such persons, as if God had given me inadequate brains. I still continue to be secretly jealous of many of such people. I feel the same way with people who can tell jokes. I am a terrible joke teller; but worse yet, I put myself down for not having that gift. Nor do I develop that gift. One of the primary keys of life is to accept the gifts that God has uniquely given you, your *unique blend* of talents, aptitudes, abilities, life experiences, the sum total of all your resources. That means to accept the gifts you *don't* have, get on with life, and use the God given gifts that you have been given.

The third step is to enjoy your God-given gifts. To take pleasure in them, to appreciate what God can do through your life.

The fourth step is to mature or develop those gifts. Like all gifts, they need to be put to work, to be exercised, developed. Nothing in this world becomes stronger without hard work and investment of time, self and energy. Just to rely on native talent and avoid the hard work of developing that gift will lead you nowhere, but will cheapen your gift and you as a person. We all know people who live off their gifts and resources and not truly discipline themselves.

And the fifth step involves all of the steps, and this is to surrender all your gifts to God. It means to give all of your gifts to Jesus Christ. That's what was wise about the Wiseman. Their wisdom wasn't merely giving their material gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but it was the gift of their total selves to their journey to find Christ. Their trip took years to find Christ in their searching, their looking, their time, and their energy. They were totally devoted to the mission of finding Christ, using all of their resources. Wisdom is giving all of your gifts to Jesus Christ. .... If you don't, you will use your gifts for your own benefit...to glorify yourself or to satisfy yourself. And it's either/or; one way or another; there is no middle ground. Either you give your gifts to the service of Christ and his mission in this world, or you don't.

So those are the five steps about your gifts: discovering, accepting, taking joy in, maturing, and surrendering them to the work of God in this world.

But there is one more aspect we haven't discussed. When you discover your gifts, use your gifts, and surrender your gifts, you are doing the will of God for your life. In this book, GIFTS OF GRACE, the author refers to another book, THE EIGHTH DAY OF CREATION, in which is discussed the thesis of discovering the will of God for your life. Many people ask that question. You have asked that question: *What is God's will for my life?* Very simply, God wants you to

discover, surrender, and use your gifts. It's not that difficult. People make it such a complex issue; what is the will of God for my life. Like so many essential questions, it is simple, more simple than we want it. To do the will of God is to discover and use your God-given resources to make the world a better place, to be the kingdom of God in your little time and space.

One more issue: the difference between candles and stars. We are all candles, little lights turning away the darkness for one brief, brief moment in our journey here on earth. There are very few stars. The vast, vast majority of us are little candles who bring light to lives around us.

Now this sermon becomes interactive. That is, I want you to write down on your bulletin or worship registration card five gifts that God has given you. Please. Everyone. If not, you will spend the rest of 1998 in a Lutheran purgatory and who would want to do that. So everyone, children too. Write down five gifts that God has given you, knowing that you have been given hundreds. Remember gifts are talents, abilities, aptitudes, events that have happened to you, some tragic, some great, its the sum total of all the resources that God has been giving to you throughout your lifetime. .... Now, would two or three of you share your lists. ... (Discussion). ... Now, when you go home after church, I would be appreciative if you would ask someone who knows you to add five more gifts to your list that God has given you. That way the sermon can continue.

Now comes the second part of the interactive sermon. You determine the will of God for individuals by ascertaining their gifts and then surrendering those gifts to the work of God. The same principle is true of groups of people: nations, cities, schools, and churches. Write down on the same paper five gifts you believe that God has given to Grace Lutheran Church. Congregations, like people, are all different and have slightly different callings, based on the gifts that God has given. What is the blend of gifts that God has given to Grace Lutheran Church? As we discover these gifts, accept them, surrender them, mature them, we end up doing the will of God for this congregation. It's pretty simple. After you have composed your list, I would like to you raise your hand and mention one gift that God has given this congregation. You young people and children are really good at this, so I want to hear from you as well. (Discussion about the gifts and therefore unique calling of Grace Lutheran Church.)

Well, today is Epiphany Sunday at Grace Lutheran Church. It is that Sunday in which we celebrate the gift that the Wiseman brought to Christ. And indeed, that is when someone is wise: when they discover the unique blend of gifts that God has given, accepted those gifts, enjoyed those gifts, matured those gifts, and surrendered those gifts to Christ. That is a wise person. Amen.