

Gifts

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Psalm 25:6-10 (The Inclusive Bible translation)

6 Remember your mercies, God, your love— your ancient and unwavering love!

7 Pardon the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; remember me because of your love, because of your goodness, God!

8 And how good and upright you are, God! You instruct sinners in the path,
9 you guide the humble in what is right, and teach them your way.

10 All of your paths, God, are full of love and faithfulness for those who keep your Covenant and Testimonies.

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16 (The Inclusive Bible translation)

I plead with you, then, in the name of our Redeemer, to lead a life worthy of your calling.

2 Treat one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. 3 Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the peace that binds you together.

4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called into one hope when you were called. 5 There is one Savior, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Creator of all, who is over all, who works through all and is within all. 7 Each of us has received God's grace in the measure in which Christ has bestowed it.

11 And to some, the gift they were given is that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers. 12 These gifts were given to equip fully the holy ones for the work of service, and to build up the body of Christ—13 until we all attain unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Only Begotten of God, until we become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Let us then be children no longer, tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine, or by human trickery or crafty, deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, let us speak the truth in love, and grow to the full maturity of Christ, the head. 16 Through Christ, the whole body grows. With the proper functioning of each member, firmly joined together by each supporting ligament, the body builds itself up in love.

Sermon

Your gift is that you know how to welcome someone. Folks remember your warmth on their first visit.

Your gift is that you know our history. You can tell the story.

Your gift is that you know how to fix things.

Your gift is you know who to call.

Your gift is that you sing like an angel.

Your gift is that you listen.

Your gift is you know just how to aim the camera, boost the sound.

Your gift is that you can support a child's learning - especially their learning that they are beloved of God, beloved of this community.

You might wonder what your gift is, but I do not wonder, because you are here, in the Zoom, in the room, and that is a gift.

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Your gift is not magic. Your gift does not make headlines outside these walls. Your gift is a gift of *agape* love, a gift made for sharing. Your gift is the gift Christ gave you, well apportioned, measured out for you, not greater or lesser than anyone else's. Christ's gifts never run out, but the ones you have are specially given to *you*. The gifts,

“that some should be apostles;... some, prophets;... some, evangelists;... some, pastors and teachers”

(You get that this list is incomplete)

Some bakers and some card writers, some ride givers and some justice proclaimers, some who climb ladders and some who kneel down next to children, some who pray, some who make documents, some who study, and some who sit next to you when you need to cry.

The gifts you have been given, the gifts we have been given - these gifts were given to equip fully the holy ones, the saints, the congregation, for the work of service, and to build up the body of Christ.

Your gifts build up the body of Christ in this place, into a strong body, into - Ephesians calls it a ligamentous body, firmly joined together, a body that is here to keep God's covenant. We are so strongly bound together, into this community, thanks be to God. A body that is here to worship God, care for each other, serve our neighbors, and be church.

What the church does, which does not happen everywhere, is that we look for each other's gifts, and we realize they don't always come with lines on resumes, degrees, or fame. They come with love.

You know I have *covenant* on the mind. As Sarah and I shared with the kids (and y'all, too) last week, a covenant is a promise, and a church covenant is a sacred promise. God is in our covenants. But a covenant is more than just a promise. A covenant is a strong bond that makes it possible for people to stick together. God is the strength and beauty of our covenant.

In my UCC polity class, we read about how the concept of covenant is what makes a local UCC church work, and what keeps us with the wider church. We like our independence in the UCC, individual independence and the independence of our local congregations. There is nothing that forces us to be here together in this congregation, and nothing that forces us to be part of the UCC. (More about our connections to the wider church in the next two weeks.) We individuals are independent in our beliefs. But all the way back in 1629, William Ames had this to say about "what makes a church a church:

'Believers do not make a particular church...unless they are joined together by a special bond among themselves...this bond is a covenant, expressed or implicitly, by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose...of the church.'¹

We're here, in Pilgrim Church, with each other, because we have promised to be a community of Christians, together.

Mary Susan Gast, writing about the UCC, says:

¹ Quoted on page 28 of *That They May All Be One: Covenant, Hospitality, and the Expanding Identity of the United Church of Christ*, by Mary Susan Gast.

“It is within our local church that we first learn and live the covenant that binds us to one another in service to God....we could say the body of Christ is ligamentous...we have this connecting or unifying bond....flexible, elastic, tough, and fibrous....Ligaments in our church life allow us to move with grace and ease, to pick up and carry, to go beyond where we now are, and to pull ourselves and each other up and out when we are stuck.”²

We have some ligamentous-ness in this church and we recognized it and celebrated it last week at our annual meeting. We talked about the work of this church, and we celebrated the gifts and dedication of the people of this church in that work. I lost count of how many people stood to give thanks for the gifts of their siblings in this church. That some would invest and some would distribute; that some would plan and some would teach; that some would moderate and some would take notes; that some would sing and some would play...

The psalmist wrote, “All of your paths, God, are full of love and faithfulness for those who keep your Covenant and Testimonies.” Love, steadfast love and faithfulness, in Hebrew the wonderful word *chesed*: God’s steadfast love and faithfulness are given to us when we follow God’s ways of covenant.

And thank God for *your* gift, because your gift is an essential part of this ligamentous, strongly bound, wonderful local instantiation of the body of Christ.

“Through Christ, the whole body grows. With the proper functioning of each member, firmly joined together by each supporting ligament, the body builds itself up in love.”

Amen.

² Page 29, *ibid*.