

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Romans 12:1-8
SERMON SERIES: A Commitment to Keep
SERMON TITLE: Gifts

Over two of the last three Sundays we've been looking at the commitment we make when we join the United Methodist Church. We promise to support the ministries of our church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. Today we look at gifts.

And I'm wondering: In what ways do we make gifts of ourselves through our giving at work—or at school—or at home—or in retirement—or to sports—or to recreation—or to entertainment—or to social events—or to civic pursuits—or to the church? Do we give our time, our talents, our wealth, our effort? Why do we give these gifts? How do we prioritize our giving amongst all of these different aspects of life? How do we decide how much of ourselves to give in each of these areas?

It sounds to me as if this kind of gift-giving is an important part of life. And guess what? Gifts are important to God. So I invite you to listen for God's word to us today through the book of Romans, chapter 12, verses 1-8. **SCRIPTURE READING.**

Gifts are important to God. In fact, God is a giver of gifts. And the truth is, we can't begin to talk about the gifts we're to give without first talking about the gifts that God has already given us.

This is where Paul begins. He makes his appeal to us based upon *the mercies of God*? These *mercies* have already been given to us. In fact, if we read through the first eleven chapters of Romans, we gain some idea of what these mercies are: the gospel of Jesus Christ that is the power of God to bring us wholeness of life, the death of Jesus Christ that proves God's love for us, the possibility of faith that connects us to God, freedom from death, freedom from sin, the gift of the Spirit, God's faithfulness in keeping promises, and on and on it goes.

Given these gifts—these *mercies of God*—what are we to do? We're to give back by offering ourselves as a gift. Paul uses the language of sacrifice and temple to make his point: *present yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.*

I like the way Eugene Peterson translates a portion of verse 1 in *The Message*: *Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him¹*—which is to say that the most basic gift we have to give is all of who we are—our bodies, our minds, our time, our talents, our wealth, our energy, our effort, all that we do—offered to the service of God whether we're at work, or in school, or in the home, or at play, or in the church. This basic giving of ourselves to God is the foundation of everything else we do. It's worship as lifestyle.

So as people consecrated to God, when we pour ourselves out for the sake of a job, for example, our actions on the job are to be consistent with the will of God. We may work for the State, or a high-tech firm, or a school district, or a retail store—but first and foremost we are an offering to God. We're a people committed to transformation and not conformity. We're called to stand for justice and mercy in the workplace, we're to represent the love of Christ to those we work with and serve, we're to reflect the values of the kingdom of God even though the pressure may be to conduct business as usual.

And the truth is, when we give of ourselves like this, no matter what the setting, we are an extension of the ministry of Jesus Christ through this local church. We become in effect, field representatives of Christ and this congregation. This is the bottom line.

¹ Peterson, Eugene. *The Message*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002, 2054.

But Paul is not done with us yet. He amplifies his understanding of the *mercies of God* by identifying specific gifts that are given by God to the members of the church. He mentions specifically: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, compassion.

So what are we to do with these gifts? We're to use them for the benefit of others and for the church; we make gifts of the gifts. We offer them back to God. When we do this, we become *one body in Christ* even though the body is made up of many members and each with differing gifts or functions. In fact for the body to be a healthy and whole, all the parts of the body have to work together.

So what are your gifts and how will you use them to participate in the ministries of this church? This is, after all, what we've promised to do. And God only knows we need people to speak out of their discernment of the word of God; we need people to minister to those who are hurting; we need people to teach, to spur us on, to give generously of their wealth; to lead, and to display compassion with cheerfulness. God has given these gifts to us and every single one of us has something to give back.

And when it all comes together, it's a sight to behold. For example, Pastor Wayne Cordeiro writes of one of the Christmas Eve services his church held back in 1996. He writes: *We had a packed program filled with multi-media, dance, mime, drama, a one-hundred-voice choir, and ensembles; I mean, the works!...*

The evening's musical erupted with a song of magnificent celebration. The dancers flowed onto the stage expressing the exuberance of the song with cartwheels and twists. Fred Rodie, a former university cheerleader, came bounding across the platform with flips and somersaults. Others were tossed into the air for the finale...

Then it hit me. As I watched our outstanding keyboardist, Steve Kenny, play the piano with all his heart, I thought to myself, “Steve is preaching the Gospel the best way he knows how...through his piano!”

Then I watched Clarke Bright playing the drums so excellently, as he always does....I said to myself, “Clarke is preaching the Gospel the best way he knows how...through his drums!”

Then I looked into the radiant faces of the choir where many lives had recently been transformed by the Lord’s grace, and I said to myself, “Those wonderful people are all preaching the Gospel the best way they know how...through their singing! I watched the mime, then the drama, then an ensemble, and I remember thinking, “They’re all preaching the Gospel the best way they know how...through their gifts!”

I looked out into the audience to where our video people were running the cameras. I watched the stage coordinators move with such poise and rhythm, rearranging microphones and straightening cords. I observed the ushers greeting people with genuine enthusiasm. I caught the faces of different individuals who had, through their relationships and contacts, invited friends and neighbors. They were all preaching the Gospel through their gifts and passions, talents and contacts.

Every single person had a part. It was not one presentation of the Gospel, but over three hundred volunteers contributing their presentations of the Gospel, all at the same time in one evening! That’s what made it so powerful!²

Well, folks, look around. There are gifts being given this morning. And all of us have gifts to give.

² Cordeiro, Wayne. *Doing Church as a Team*. Honolulu, HI: New Hope Resources, 1998, 67-69.

But I've got to tell you, one of the fantasies of I have of church involves this image of every member of this congregation lining up outside my office door, waiting to talk with me about how each one's gifts can be used to strengthen the ministries of our church. I see the line snaking through the Education Building and out into the parking lot and beyond. No bulletin inserts or announcements or recruitment efforts—just people eager to offer their gifts for the service of God.

Now I know it's just a wild fantasy, but on the other hand, why not? After all, we've made a promise; we have a commitment to keep. Thanks be to God.