

“The Active Ingredient”

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^{3b}No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. ⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

(1 Corinthians 12:3b-13)

Every summer in the mountains of North Carolina, thousands of young Presbyterians attend the Montreat Youth Conference. Six times a summer, the Montreat Conference Center welcomes a group of nearly one thousand young people for a week of recreation, bonding, and fun. It is also a time of worship, prayer, and reflection, and each day begins with the whole group gathering in Anderson Auditorium for a keynote address, which is essentially a fun, interactive sermon. Now, it may be fun and interactive, but there is still a challenge to motivate one thousand teenagers to get up, get dressed, and go to a church service at 9 a.m. in the summer. Fortunately, the conference organizers have developed a rock-solid strategy to get the blood pumping, and that strategy is called “Energizers.”

Energizers are simple dances set to upbeat music. Quoting the conference materials, they are “designed to get your body and your heart moving and ready.”¹ Their purpose is, literally, to energize the group and get the kids engaged... and I can tell you from personal experience that they really work. It is amazing to see a thousand people on a lazy July morning go from zero to sixty in two minutes or less. We are hoping that a group of young people from LAC will start making the trip down to Montreat in coming years so they can experience this phenomenon for themselves and then bring some of that magic back to us.

The Montreat energizer experience comes readily to mind because “energy” is a prime focus of this scripture from Paul’s letters to the Corinthians. In the original Greek text, two related words are repeated in key places: *energéma* and *energeó*:

- *Energéma* is a noun that means a job, an activity, something that people do.
- *Energeó* is a verb which means “to do a job,” “to be at active or at work,” “to accomplish” something.

¹ <https://montreat.org/y-ya-events/myc-guidebook>.



Paul repeats these words because, in looking at the church in Corinth, he sees certain activities that are being activated... works that are being worked... operations that are being operated. He is discussing what we might call their “spiritual gifts” – things that people in the church were doing... ways they were using their energy to help – and he lists a few examples. Some people had special wisdom or knowledge; others had great faith that inspired the church; others were healers who could work miracles; still others had gifts of vision and foresight like the prophets of old. And one group had the talent some considered to be the greatest of all: the ability to interpret what was being said when someone was overcome with the Holy Spirit and started speaking in tongues. These were all ways that Paul saw the God at work in the church through the people of the church.

Admittedly, some of this may seem a bit distant and bizarre to us – especially the healing and speaking in tongues parts -- but I think we can all understand the idea that, within a group of people, some people are just better at certain tasks than others. One person might be able to bake a great loaf of bread but is terrified of public speaking. Another might be good with numbers, but a physical disability prevents them from mowing the church lawn. Another person may love singing in the choir but otherwise be very shy. If we can approach this text with that in mind, this passage has much to tell us about the things we do in this church, and how we are using our individual time, gifts, and energy to serve God in this place. This morning I want to highlight four such truths we can find in this passage.

The first truth is that the things we do are ***gifts, not accomplishments***. Context clues from Paul’s letters make it clear that the Corinthians were getting a little cocky about their individual skills and abilities. They were spending a lot of time and energy comparing themselves to one another, and – as human beings often do – those comparisons started to create an informal ranking in the church. Some gifts began to be considered “better” than others, which led to a kind of elitism in certain segments of the church.

There is a popular quote often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt -- but sometimes to Mark Twain or the author C.S. Lewis – that goes something like this: “comparison is the thief of joy.” People dispute who it was who really said it, but very few dispute its essential truth. When we spend too much time comparing ourselves to others, ranking ourselves by various arbitrary measures, we waste valuable energy on something that usually just makes us feel worse. “Compare and despair,” as Stuart Smalley would say. “You need a checkup from the neck up.”

In this passage, Paul suggests that, when we rank ourselves based on aptitude, we are taking credit for something that we did not create. By definition, an aptitude is “a *natural* ability to do something.” It is something we are born with... a gift bestowed by our Creator. Yes, we can cultivate an aptitude. Yes, we can hone a talent and get better at a skill – but the gifts that really seem to matter to the church and to God are things that we are given by God. They are not accomplishments for us to take credit for or get cocky about.

The second lesson is that ***every person has spiritual gifts that are unique to that person***. Comparing can always lead to despairing – but that is especially true when we look around and readily acknowledge the gifts we see in other people, but have a tougher time recognizing special gifts in ourselves. It reminds me of Buddy the Elf, the human accidentally dropped into a world of Christmas elves. He sees the elves around him thriving and succeeding at their various tasks, but he struggles to make a contribution. Concluding

that he must be the worst toy maker in the world, he puts himself down with most negative, gasp-worthy name he can call himself -- “a cotton-headed ninny-muggins.”

His supervisor objects. “No, Buddy, you're not cotton-headed ninny-muggins. We all just have different talents, that's all.”

But Buddy still can't recognize any talents in himself. “Seems like everyone else has the same talents except for me,” he says. The group tries to cheer him up by listing some of Buddy's gifts, but even they struggle to come up with anything solid. He still feels useless within the group.

Lest we ever feel like this – lest we compare ourselves to others and think we come up lacking, or that our abilities are not all that useful to the body -- Paul assures us that, in the life of faith and in the life of the church, we all have something special to add – something unique to give that is bestowed upon us at birth by God. There are varieties of gifts and activities” Paul says, but everyone is given something – some “*manifestation of the Spirit*” that is important to the life and health of the body.

There is an old legend embedded in the story of St. Francis of Assisi about a humble man known as “Brother Juniper.” We know very little about him... where he was born, whether he was rich or poor... whether he was a tradesman or a farmer or a doctor or a priest. We do know that he was a friar who was received into the Franciscan order by Francis himself... we know that his name came from the Juniper tree... and we know that he was not that bright. He once cooked a stew for the other friars, which was nice, except that he forgot to shell the eggs or pluck the chickens before tossing them into the pot. Apparently, he had cut those corners in order to have more time for prayer.

Juniper was always doing strange things that confounded the other friars – sometimes embarrassing things that made them all look bad in the eyes of the community. But over time the friars began to realize that everything Juniper did he did for other people, and that he transformed even the most mundane tasks into acts of love. It took time, but Juniper's special talents were eventually recognized not only by him, but by the entire group. “Would to God,” Francis came to say, “that I had a forest of such Junipers!”²

In the eyes of God, every person – every one of us -- has something valuable and beautiful to give – something given to us, and just to us, to make this world a better place.

That leads us to the third lesson we receive from this passage about the spiritual gifts we are given, and that is that they are ***intended to be “for the common good.”*** As he looked over the churches he planted, there was a key test that Paul always used to determine how healthy they were: are the people of that church using their time, their talents, their energy, and their resources for the good of others? Are we helping the church, or helping ourselves? Paul knew that the people had gifts – but he wanted to know that they were using them as God intended.

This idea is obvious in today's passage: “*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” Reflecting on that powerful statement, one 19th century scholar wrote, “These gifts which flow from [God] are intended to flow towards one object, [and that object is] the benefit of the whole Church. If [the gift] were only for a man's own benefit it would cease to be a “manifestation”—it would be sufficient for the person to

² <https://www.teachingcatholickids.com/meet-brother-juniper-saints-for-kids/>;
<https://assisiproject.com/2019/01/27/a-forest-full-of-junipers/>

possess the spirit consciously to himself [and use it just for himself]. But the object of light is to give light to others. The object of the spiritual light is to make manifest to others.”³

In short, the gifts we receive from God are not for our own gain. Our spiritual gifts are blessings to be shared with everyone. The good in us is for the common good.

Last, but certainly not least, the gifts we receive from God are ***activated by God***. If we want our gifts to serve God and the common good, then they must first be activated by God. Our energy has to be energized by God. Our works have to be worked by God.

On this beautiful holiday weekend, many of us will be headed out to enjoy the sunshine. And if we are wise, when we do, we will be applying liberal amounts of sunscreen. When we do that, we will be depending heavily upon oxybenzone – that is the compound in sunscreen that actually keeps the sunlight from burning our skin. Without oxybenzone, it’s just lotion... just moisturizer. The oxybenzone is what we would call the “active ingredient” – it is the thing within the thing that allows the thing to do the thing that it is supposed to do.

This is the key to everything Paul wants us to understand about our spiritual gifts.

- We can understand that the talents we have – the ones that really matter -- are not accomplishments for us to brag about... they are gifts implanted within us by our Creator.
- We can be confident that every person has such gifts – that, regardless of whether we discover them early or late, we know that God has imbued each of us with something useful that also is singularly unique.
- And we can try our best to use these special talents not for our own gain, but for the good of all.

But just understanding these concepts is not enough. This is more than an intellectual exercise. The God-given talents in each of us will lie largely dormant if we cannot open ourselves to the reality of God... the potential of God... that lives in all of us. Our true potential will not be energized... our good works will not be worked out... our highest levels of activity will not be activated... unless and until the power and presence of the Holy Spirit falls upon us like it fell on the disciples at Pentecost.

That is the Active Ingredient that unlocks our true potential. That is the blessing that allows us, frees us, and enables us to do the thing that God created us to do. We cannot grab it for ourselves, but we can look for it... we can hope for it... we can pray for it... and we can trust that it will find us when the time is right. ***Amen.***

³ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/1_corinthians/12.htm