

Discerning God's Spiritual Gifts In Our Midst

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from God's only Son who has given his spirit for the life of the Church, amen.

I have to tell you I was and still am a little bit apprehensive about our little procession we had today. I mean give me a fishing pole and there's a pretty good chance someone's going to get poked or hooked. If not, then there's the public reaction to a grown man dangling brightly colored streamers over everyone's heads... In another lifetime I was told this was childish and beneath us to behave in such a way. Nevertheless, several jumped on the idea and here we are. The children make it seem a little more palatable, but I still hope and pray it wasn't too over the top for your tastes... In the end, I thought it might be a good way to help us rekindle the fire that animated the early Church and brought so many new believers into the faith. (SLIDE) That's what the miracle of Pentecost is all about. What happened on that first Christian Pentecost was all about quickly spreading the Good News about Jesus Christ to as many people as possible in as short a period of time as possible. Spread the Word it did.

Most of us think of Pentecost as that day when people began to speak in tongues. (SLIDE) Until this week that's what I thought as well. God opened the mouths of the Apostles and they spoke in many languages. I never really thought much further or deeper than that. The truth I discovered this week as I pondered the scripture was that there really were two miracles that day. Yes, the Apostles did

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speak in different languages, but their words were heard and understood by all those different folks from all those different countries and parts of the world, in their native languages. (SLIDE) One miracle was in the speaking and the second miracle was in the hearing and understanding of what the Apostles were saying.

Let's fast forward 40 or 50 years from that first Pentecost to the time when Paul needed to write this letter to the Church he founded in the city of Corinth. Now humans, being the sinful creatures that we are, can turn the most blessed gift into a nightmare. Unfortunately, that's exactly what was going on within the congregation of the Church in the city of Corinth. They were arguing and fighting over whose spiritual gifts were more important and who should get the most respect within the Church. Evidently, some within the Church valued speaking in tongues so much they thought they were the bees' knees. If any think I acted childish by prancing around with my fishing pole and flame colored streamers please refer to Paul's words, that it takes all parts of the body to make the Body of Christ. If you go that far with me, then I'll also remember the rest of Paul's words where he reminds us that the purpose of any spiritual gift is the building up of the Body of Christ.

So, does Paul give us any help in figuring out if the use of certain spiritual gifts are from God or from some other spirit? According to the apostle Paul, one way to know whether a movement is led by the Spirit of God is to listen for its

Discerning God's Spiritual Gifts In Our Midst

claims about Jesus Christ. The Spirit makes Jesus known to us in the cross (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-31), the supper (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:23-34), and the resurrection (cf. 1 Corinthians 15). (SLIDE) By the Spirit, the church testifies that Jesus—not money, security, self esteem, paranoia, power, or anything else—is Lord. Gifts from God's Spirit proclaim Jesus as Lord. They also serve the common good. Paul's second criterion for discerning the work of the Holy Spirit points to the Spirit's interest in the common life of those it draws together. Just as the Spirit is all about talking up Jesus as Lord, so the Spirit is all about building up the group rather than just certain individuals. Paul reminds the Corinthian Church and also us today, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). (SLIDE) So, if my flaming streamers build us up and help us to love one another as Jesus commanded, then it's probably okay. If it makes half the congregation uncomfortable or distracts from making Jesus known, then we should rethink using these streamers again next year... Individuals receive gifts from the Spirit, yet each gift is for the body as a whole. This implies that if a gift cannot be shared, and shared for the good of others, it is not from the Spirit. It also implies that any attempt to rank individuals according to their possession of "better" gifts would be at odds with each gift's common purpose for the good of all. The third clue Paul offers to us as we try to discern if a certain thing is from God's spirit or not is a sort of negative criterion. Whatever God's Spirit is doing, it

Discerning God's Spiritual Gifts In Our Midst

will probably not be characterized by tidiness. When you are looking for the Spirit's gifts, look for a bit of a mess. So, Paul tells us we can tell if something is from the Holy Spirit if it helps us to make Jesus Christ known to the world as God's Son and our Lord and Savior. It must also help to build up the entire body of Christ not make any one person or group seem better than the rest. Thirdly, gifts of the Holy Spirit will always be characterized by a bit of messiness.

All of that sounds easy enough, but what happens when I think flame colored streamers build up, but someone else thinks they're stupid and it makes them uncomfortable or even angry? Then the thing I thought would build up the church only serves to alienate or tear down. Discerning what builds up and what tears down can be messy business. Being Church together has been messy since the beginning. I mean the speaking and hearing miracles of the first Pentecost were certainly marvelous miracles to behold, but even then some thought the Apostles must have been drunk already at 9 O'clock in the morning.

The Corinthians were the original religious enthusiasts. Judging by Paul's letters they swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all. (SLIDE) They became enamored by the sort of external, glamorous manifestations of the spirit like speaking in tongues, prophesying, and healing, while ignoring or making less of the quieter ways in which God's spirit moves. They did not seem to appreciate the ways the Spirit gathered many diverse people together to be the Body of Christ. It

Discerning God's Spiritual Gifts In Our Midst

got so bad they couldn't even celebrate the Lord's Supper together because some thought they were so much better than the others.

In this upside down world we live in today how can we still tell if we're on the right track or the highway to that other place? (SLIDE) We can start by keeping Paul's three criterion in mind. We're doing God's work if we're making Jesus Christ known in our world as God's Son and our Savior and our Lord. Are we using our Spiritual Gifts to build up the Body of Christ within our Congregation and to literally build up the Body by attracting new members *and* helping them grow in their faith. Finally, if we're not making a little bit of a mess then we're probably not using the Spiritual Gifts God has given to us. (SLIDE)

May we continue to discern our Spiritual Gifts. May we share the Gifts God has given to each of us in order to build up the entire Body of Christ, and may we part of God's messy children as we find fresh ways to make Jesus Christ known to this lost and broken world that needs God's Good News of love. Amen.