

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 2, 2017**

GIFTED (2)

Romans 12:4-8

I've seen the movie. I'm sure some of you have, too. Now I'm reading the book. I'm talking about *Hidden Figures*, the movie with Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Kevin Kostner, Jim Parsons, and other notable actors, which is based on the book by Margot Lee Shetterly.

It takes only two hours to watch the movie, considerably longer to read the book. While the movie is based on the book, it takes liberties with some historical facts in the interest of telling the story within the parameters of a two-hour movie. In case you're not familiar with the story, or only familiar with the movie, here is the blurb from the back cover of the book that gives a brief synopsis of the true story of these unheralded African American women who worked as "human computers" for NASA and its predecessor, NACA (the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics):

"Before John Glenn orbited the earth, or Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, a group of dedicated female mathematicians known as 'human computers' used pencils, slide rules, and adding machines to calculate the numbers that would launch rockets, and astronauts, into space.

"Among these problem-solvers were a group of exceptionally talented African American women. Originally math teachers in the South's segregated public schools, these gifted professionals answered Uncle Sam's call during the labor shortages of World War II. With new jobs at the fascinating, high-energy world of the Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory in Hampton, Virginia, they finally had a shot at jobs that would push their skills to the limits.

"Even as Virginia's Jim Crow laws required them to be segregated from their white counterparts, the women of Langley's all-black 'West Computing' group helped America achieve one of the things it desired most: a decisive victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and complete domination of the heavens.

"Starting in World War II and moving through the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Space Race, *Hidden Figures* follows the interwoven accounts of Dorothy Vaughan, Mary Jackson, Katherine Johnson, and Christine Darden – four African American women who participated in some of NASA's greatest successes."

I tell you this today not simply because *Hidden Figures* tells a fascinating story, or because it is a good movie or an interesting read, but because the story of these "human computers" illustrates what Paul says in Romans 12 about how "in Christ we who are many form one body," and that "we have different gifts, according to the grace given us" (12:5-6). Paul expands on this in 1 Corinthians 12, where he notes that "the body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body." As it is with the

human body, says Paul, “so it is with Christ” (12:12). As the human body is a unified whole, though it is made up of a vast array of individual parts, so we are connected to our Lord Jesus Christ and to one another in one spiritual body through our faith in Him.

Here is how it works in the church: “There are different kinds of (spiritual) gifts,” says Paul, but they all come from the Holy Spirit. “There are different ways of serving,” but they all come from the Lord Jesus. “There are different expressions of God’s power,” but the one and only God is behind them all. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

Are these spiritual gifts given only to a select few believers? No. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” To each one. Which is to say, every Christian has received some spiritual gift(s), some ministry gift(s) to be used “for the common good.” For the blessing and building up of the church. For the blessing of our community. For the blessing of the world. And, above all, for the glory, honor, and praise of God.

Do you see how this relates to *Hidden Figures*? Like the critical, though largely unrecognized (until now) role played by these African American “human computers” in the early years of the U. S. space program with all their mathematical formulas and computations, each of us, as individual members of the body of Christ here at Faith, has a role to play in the united effort of the church to fulfill our mission to be the people of God, to model what life is like under the Lordship of Jesus, to introduce others to Jesus and invite them to become His disciples – to love God above all else, to love one another as Jesus loves us, and to love our neighbors near and far. Like the heroic women of *Hidden Figures*, we all have a role to play in the work of God’s kingdom. And the stakes of our mission are infinitely greater than the mission to win the space race and to put a man on the moon.

You have been given a gift – the Greek word is *charisma*, the plural of which is *charismata* (from which we get the word “charismatic”). You have been given a spiritual gift, maybe more than one. These gifts or *charismata* are special endowments the Holy Spirit confers on believers, given to us according to God’s pleasure, to be used, as we have already seen, “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). For the profit of others. For the benefit of the church as a whole.

As Paul notes in Romans 12:6, different gifts are given to different people. Not everyone receives the same gift(s). Whatever your gift(s), every gift is important. Every gift is needed. There is no such thing as an insignificant or irrelevant spiritual gift. There is a place and a need for every spiritual gift the Lord chooses to give His people. Having received a spiritual gift from God, or more than one, every Christian is responsible before God to exercise our gift(s) in ministry, trusting God to use those gifts for His purposes.

In Romans 12, Paul specifies seven different spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12, there are two lists of gifts, neither of which is identical to the other or to the list in Romans 12. There is still another list in Ephesians 4. None of them is a complete, unabridged listing of spiritual gifts. But each list adds to the breadth of our understanding of the diversity of gifts God has given us in the church.

The Apostle Peter gives a kind of summary statement about spiritual gifts in 1 Peter 4:10-11, where he says: “Each one of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If you speak, do it as one speaking the very words of God. If you serve, do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.” This indicates that there are two basic categories of spiritual gifts: *speaking* gifts and *servicing* gifts. All of the gifts in the various lists of spiritual gifts in the New Testament fit in one or the other, or in some cases, both of these categories.

Let’s look at the gifts Paul mentions here in Romans 12. First on the list is the gift of *prophecy*. The role of a prophet in the Old Testament was to speak to people on behalf of God. The prophet’s task was to communicate God’s message, God’s word, to the people of his day. Not always, but often, at least part of the prophet’s ministry was to foretell the future as God made it known to the prophet, whether it held judgment or blessing for those to whom the prophecy was addressed.

The role of a prophet in the New Testament was not so much future-oriented as it was focused on “forth-telling” the Word of God for the present time in which the message from God was given. The essence of the New Testament gift of prophecy is to speak God’s message in a way that will both convict and build up those who hear it. It seems to me that this is very similar, if not identical, to the gift of preaching, in which the preacher like Paul (Acts 20:27) endeavors to proclaim “the whole counsel of God” in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second on the list is the gift of *servicing others*. The word Paul uses is *diakonon*, from which we get the word “deacon.” This kind of serving can take many forms, but the heart of it is ministering to the material or physical needs of others. Which is what the Lord wants you to do if He has given you this gift of caring service to others.

Third is the gift of *teaching*. Maybe it is the gift of teaching adults. Maybe it is the gift of teaching high schoolers or middle schoolers. Maybe it is the gift of teaching younger children. If God has given you this gift, this special ability to instruct any group or any age, do you know what He wants you to do with your gift? As with any and all of the other gifts, He wants you to use it. He wants you to put it to work. As Paul says, “If your gift is teaching, teach” (Romans 12:7).

Then there is the gift of *encouragement* or *exhortation*. Barnabas was a member of the New Testament church who had the gift of encouragement. His real name was Joseph, but the leaders of the church in Jerusalem gave him the name Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36), because he had a special knack for building others up, for believing in them and inspiring them in their devotion and faithfulness to God. That is a gift, an enormously valuable gift, because lots of us need to be encouraged to keep on keeping on with Jesus when the hard things of life get us down.

Next is the gift of *generosity* or “contributing to the needs of others.” Some people have the resources to be generous, but not the heart. If you have the heart, if you derive great pleasure from giving to others, whether you have a lot of resources or only a little, you can bless others

with the gift of generosity. A person with the gift of generosity does not give reluctantly or out of a sense of obligation. For the person with the gift of generosity, giving to others is not a “have-to” but a “get-to” that is met with the joy of sharing.

Sixth on the list is the gift of *leadership* or *administration*. Not every leader has the gift of leadership. If you have the gift of leadership or administration, make sure you use that gift (with humility) to serve God’s purposes in whatever leadership role He calls you to fill.

Seventh, and last on the list here in Romans, is the gift of *showing mercy* to those who are sick or needy in any way, and doing it cheerfully. Not grudgingly. Regardless of whether we have this particular gift or not, we are all called to be merciful to others. Jesus called the merciful blessed (Matthew 5:7). As sinners who have received mercy from God (and grace), we are to be merciful to others. But some of us have received a special gift of mercy from God that enables us to be instruments of mercy in a beautiful and powerful way to bring blessing to others.

Has God given you one (or more than one) of these gifts? If you know, or even think, the answer is yes, you know what God wants you to do. He wants you to use your gifts. He wants you to look for opportunities and ways to put your gifts into practice.

If you’re not sure what gift(s) you may have, I’ll encourage you again to set aside some time to read and reflect on the gifts mentioned in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4, and ask the Lord to show you the gift(s) He has given you for His service. Ask Christian brothers or sisters you respect what spiritual gift(s) they see in you.

Among the other gifts identified in 1 Corinthians 12 are the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in other tongues or languages, and the interpretation of tongues (12:8-10).

God doesn’t want any of us to let our spiritual gifts go to waste. Every gift God gives is important. Like the women in *Hidden Figures*, God has a place and a role for you in the mission of His church in this world.

But remember this: It doesn’t matter what spiritual gifts you have, or how many you have, if you don’t have the fruit of the Spirit. “The fruit of the Spirit,” the Bible says, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23a); it also includes compassion, humility, forbearance, forgiveness, and thankfulness (Colossians 3:12-15). All the gifts in the world won’t amount to anything in the end, without the fruit of the Spirit, especially love, which brings them all together and holds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:14).

Most public school districts have “Gifted and Talented” programs for students who demonstrate a high level of academic ability or promise. Not every student is “gifted” according to the definitions or standards schools put in place. But in Christ, you are gifted. In Christ, we are all gifted. In Christ, we have all received some gift(s) of the Holy Spirit to be used to serve and glorify God, to build up the church, and to bless the world in Jesus’ name.

Discover your giftedness. Use your gifts. Don't neglect them. Don't hide them. Don't be content to sit on the sidelines (or in your pew) and let others do all the work of ministry. Find the place where you can use your gift(s) to serve the Lord and His church.

Don't let your gift(s) cause you to think of yourself more highly than you ought (Romans 12:3). And don't neglect the fruit of the Spirit in your life. It is "the more excellent way" (1 Corinthians 12:31b) and matters more than you may think.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.