

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 14, 2012**

DISCOVERING YOUR PLACE

Ephesians 4:7-16

PREVIOUSLY

Previously, in this series of messages on the church as the body of Christ in which every part of the body – every Christian, every believer, every member of God’s family – has a gift to use, a job to do, and a ministry to carry out, we have looked together at what the Bible says in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12.

We have seen, among other things, that, as redeemed sinners saved by grace and as followers of Christ, we are all united together in one body – the body of Christ, which is the church. Within the unity of the body, though, there is a tremendous diversity of parts, a tremendous diversity of roles, and a tremendous diversity of spiritual gifts given to believers by the Holy Spirit for service in and through the church. One body, many parts, many gifts.

We have seen that no true Christian, no true follower of Christ, is left out in the distribution of these spiritual gifts. “To each one,” Paul writes to the Corinthians, “the manifestation of the Spirit is given” (1 Corinthians 12:7). No one who sincerely trusts in Christ is excluded. Spiritual gifts are given to every Christian. Which includes you and me. At the moment of salvation, when you repent of your sins and embrace the gospel, when you trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of your life, you receive forgiveness and the gift of eternal life. At that moment, the Holy Spirit comes to take up residence in your life. And in His sovereign grace and wisdom, God endows you with some spiritual gift(s) to be developed and used in His service.

Here is a definition of a spiritual gift: A spiritual gift is the believer’s Spirit-given ability for Christian service (Clyde McDowell, *How to Discover Your Spiritual Gifts*, 14). A spiritual gift is not the same as a natural talent or ability. Kicking field goals is not a spiritual gift. Nor is hitting home runs. Or singing beautifully. These are natural abilities that may provide avenues for the use of spiritual gifts. But they are not spiritual gifts themselves. I enjoy mowing the lawn. And I happen to think I’m pretty good at it. Whether or not mowing the lawn is a special talent, I’m certain it is not a spiritual gift – though a spiritual gift (such as the gift of mercy or compassion or serving) could be expressed in the act of cutting the grass.

Every Christian, as we have seen, receives at least one spiritual gift. Some are given more than one. We have also seen that these gifts, whatever yours and mine may be, are to be used “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7), not for personal gain. Paul lists several spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and others in Romans 12. There is yet another list in our passage today in Ephesians 4. As I said last Sunday, the lists are not identical and they are not exhaustive. There may be and most likely are other spiritual gifts in addition to the ones named by Paul.

Whatever your gift(s), Paul says, use it (or them) “for the common good.” For the benefit of others. For the building up or strengthening of the church. To serve one another (1 Peter 4:10). To be a blessing in the church or the world. Or both.

None of us is indispensable in an ultimate sense. But all of us are needed in the body. All of us are needed if the church is to be all that God ordained and established it to be. All of us are needed if the church is to serve and fulfill God’s purposes for it in this place. All of us are needed, because, as Ray Stedman said, “It takes the whole church to do the work of the church” (*Body Life*, 146). Every member of the body of Christ is needed.

With all of this as a review and refresher, we’re ready to look together at today’s Scripture passage, which is Ephesians 4:7-16. And let’s give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God’s holy Word.

WHAT IF

I wish I could talk about the Washington Nationals under happier circumstances today. I know some of us – more like a lot of us, probably – took their loss to the St. Louis Cardinals in Game 5 of their National League playoff series Friday night pretty hard. The Nationals had a terrific season, didn’t they? Their regular season record of 98-64 was the best in the major leagues. The 2012 Nationals gave baseball fans in the D. C. area a lot to celebrate, including the first post-season appearance by a baseball team in Washington since 1933. I’m guessing that not many of us remember 1933!

We didn’t want the season to end like it did for the Nats. We didn’t want it to end short of a trip to the World Series, or even winning the World Series. We didn’t want it to end, especially by letting a big lead get away, and giving up the tying and winning runs with two outs in the ninth inning. I don’t know if some editor did this on purpose, or if it was a divine coincidence, but the “Classic Peanuts” comic strip in yesterday’s *Washington Post*, on the morning after the Nats’ season came to an end – did you see it? – showed Charlie Brown, baseball mitt on his left hand, with ball and bat beside him, saying: “Well, faithful ol’ glove, it’s time to put you away until next year.” Sadly, it is so for the Nats. And the O’s, too.

But I want you to think about something hypothetically for a moment. What if the Nats didn’t have Bryce Harper in center field? I don’t mean, what if someone else, say, Roger Bernardina, were playing center field? I mean, what if the Nats had to play without anyone in center field? Or, what if they had to play without a shortstop in the infield? Or, if they had to play without a catcher behind home plate to call pitches and keep the umpire safe from 100 mph fastballs? This isn’t like a friendly slow-pitch softball game, where you can ask a player from the batting team to be the catcher. To play without someone in any of these positions would put the Nats at a serious disadvantage, don’t you think?

Or, to change sports, what if the Redskins (or any NFL team) had to play without a left tackle? The left tackle is the guy whose main job is to protect the quarterback and prevent him from getting hit and tackled on his blind side. What if they didn’t have a left tackle? Or, if they had to attempt field goal kicks without someone to hold the ball for the kicker? John

Brodie was one of the best quarterbacks in the NFL with the San Francisco 49ers back in the 1960s. One of his duties was to be the holder on field goal attempts. When asked why he did it, suggesting it was beneath his dignity as an All-Pro quarterback, Brodie said: “Because if I didn’t, the ball would fall over.” It is as simple as that. There was a job to be done, and John Brodie was happy to do it.

To change the analogy, what if, on concert night, a choir had to perform without its soprano section? Or if the violin section didn’t show up for an orchestra’s performance of Beethoven’s Fifth? Or if your favorite rock band had to play without a drummer?

It would make it pretty difficult, if not impossible, for a team to compete and win, or for a choir, orchestra, or band to even come close to performing up to its own standard.

This is how it is for the church as the body of Christ. The way God has designed the church, every member of the body has a purpose to fulfill, a place to serve, a gift to use, and a ministry to do. When parts of the body go on strike or for any reason don’t do what God has gifted them to do, it makes it hard for the church to operate the way God intended.

TO EACH ONE OF US, GRACE

Right at the beginning of our Scripture passage for today, in Ephesians 4:7, Paul says: “To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” The English Standard Version (ESV) says: “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” In *The Message* it says: “Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his (or her) own gift.” Listen to it again: “Out of the generosity of Christ each of (you) is given (your) own gift.” It is the same tune we heard in 1 Corinthians 12 and also in Romans 12: Each one of us has received some grace-gift from the Lord Jesus Christ, out of His abounding grace and generosity and wisdom, a gift to be used for His purposes in “the work of ministry” or *diakonia* (4:12), so that all of us who make up the body of Christ may attain full “unity in the faith” – that is, unity in what we believe, in the doctrinal essentials of the faith – “and in the knowledge of the Son of God” (4:13, NIV) – not just knowing *about* Jesus but knowing Him personally in our own experience as His followers, and that we may keep on until, as it says in *The Message*, we become “fully mature adults,” spiritually speaking, “fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ” (4:13).

In verse 11, Paul says that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God who “descended” to the earth in His incarnation and who, following His death and resurrection, “ascended” into heaven in triumph over death and the devil, gave to some in the church the spiritual gifts to be apostles, or prophets, or evangelists, or pastors and teachers. With respect to these particular gifts and their expression in our time, think in broad terms of missionaries, church-planters, evangelists, pastors, preachers, and teachers of God’s Word. If we think the work of the church rests on their shoulders, if we think it is their responsibility – the responsibility, if you will, of the professional ministers – to do the work of ministry on our behalf, we’ve got it all wrong. Verse 12 says it is the job of pastor-teachers and these other gifted leaders in the church to do what? “To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (ESV).

“To equip the saints.” Who are “the saints”? No, I’m not talking about a football team. In the New Testament, the word “saints” (literally, “holy ones”) simply means “Christians.” The saints are the people of God. They are the followers of Christ. Members of the body of Christ. People like us. *We* are the saints of God. It is the saints, all of us, who are to do the work of ministry, according to the gifts, abilities, and opportunities we have been given. Every member of the body is a minister.

If you and I don’t do our parts, if we refuse to use the gifts God has given us to meet needs in the church or community, we hamstring the church. We hinder the church, or even prevent it, from being what God is calling us to be, from serving the purposes of God, from serving one another in love, and from blessing others in the name of Jesus. This is not a trifling matter. It goes to the very core of what it means to be the church in the world.

SHAPED FOR SERVING GOD

In *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren says that we are “shaped for serving God.” Paul gives it to us straight in Ephesians 2: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (2:8-9). We are saved *by faith, not by works*. Not by any acts of service we have done or can ever do. But we are saved *for service*. Listen to what Paul says next, in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are God’s workmanship” – God’s *poiema* (from which we get the word “poem”), God’s masterpiece, a work of art created by the Master of all Master Artists, a product of His sovereign grace – “created in Christ Jesus” to do what? “To do good works” – works of service, works of mercy, acts of kindness and love, works of *diakonia*, works of ministry of all kinds – “which God prepared in advance for us to do.”

You have been saved to serve God. You have been shaped for serving God. Warren says it so well in *The Purpose Driven Life*: “We are healed (by Christ) to help others. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are saved to serve, not to sit around and wait for heaven” (229). As Warren points out, there are no insignificant ministries in the church (230). Did you hear that? There is no such thing as an insignificant ministry in the church. Yes, some ministries are more visible than others. Some take place behind the scenes, with no fanfare. But all are valuable. Don’t believe me? Just think about what would happen if no one showed up to make coffee some Sunday morning. Or if Evan Duncan stopped bringing his famous shortbread. There would be panic in the church!

If you have been redeemed by the blood of Christ, you are a member of the body of Christ, and you have at least one spiritual gift, maybe more, to be used in His service. The church needs you and the gift(s) you have been given.

Clyde McDowell, the author of an excellent Bible study guide entitled *How to Discover Your Spiritual Gifts*, says that some Christians are like ornaments on a Christmas tree: “You can see they are present, but apparently they have no functional use, unless you count looking nice (18). God has a much, much higher purpose for you, for me, for all of us, for the body of Christ as a whole and for each one of us as a member of His body, than just to come to church

on Sundays and look nice. Don't settle for that. Whatever your gift, use it for the common good, for the benefit of the body, for the blessing of others, and for the glory of God.

HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR GIFT

Not sure what your gift(s) may be? Let me suggest a few steps you can take to discover your gift(s) and find your place to serve in the ministry of the church. First, go to God's Word. Study the Scripture passages that speak about spiritual gifts: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. Take time to meditate on these passages and ask God to show you how these gifts relate to your life as a member of the body of Christ.

Second, take time to pray. Ask the Lord to show you the gift(s) He has given you, and where and how to use your particular gift(s) to build up the church and to be a blessing to others.

Third, examine your own life and take an inventory of your abilities and strengths. Ask yourself questions such as: What do I enjoy doing? What gives me a sense of joy and fulfillment in my life? What am I good at? The answers to these questions are not an infallible guide to discovering your gifts, but they may give an indication of where you are gifted. Contrary to what some people think, God does not call us to serve Him in areas where He knows we will be miserable!

Fourth, try out different areas of service or ministry. Begin serving. You don't have to wait for someone to ask you. Step forward. Volunteer for duty. Don't be afraid to experiment with one ministry or another on a trial basis to see if it is a good fit for you. Keep experimenting until you find the place where your gift(s) can best be used.

Fifth, seek the insight, wisdom, and counsel of other Christians who know you well. Sometimes, others see our gifts more clearly than we do. Get feedback from other Christians whose judgments you respect.

When you discover the gift(s) God has given you, use it (them) for the sake of Christ and the church. Use your gift(s) with gusto. And rejoice that God uses weak, imperfect people. Like me. And you. Hallelujah!

JESUS AND HIS GIFTS

I want to close with these thoughts from James Montgomery Boice, who said: "(The Lord Jesus) does not squander His gifts; each one is essential. He does not withhold His gifts; they are poured out in full measure. He is not indifferent as to how His gifts are used; He has His own wise and lofty purposes in view. He does not give His gifts at cross purposes; all are to serve and edify the church. He does not abandon those to whom the gifts are given; rather, He continues to work in them and through them for the church's well being. Where the gifts are received in this spirit and are so used, there the unity of the Spirit is maintained and the body of Christ is built up ..." according to God's plan, for His purposes, and for His glory.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.