

Sermon: Pneumatikōn

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11**

Once upon awhile, back a time ago, I used to read science fiction and fantasy novels, which I kept and then read to our daughter Kate when she was learning to read. We started with a trilogy whose stories took place in a magical land called Xanth, which, according to the map included in the first novel, looked a lot like Florida. Over time, the author wrote more Xanth novels and, even though the series now includes 41 books, it continues to be known as The Xanth Trilogy. Go figure.

The idea behind the stories is that every resident of Xanth has some sort of magical talent, and most plot lines involve how the central characters end up using their particular talent to solve some problem. Most of the talents people have are silly. One person can walk on air, another is good at math – not that that is silly. One person has a talent for absent mindedness, another for healing, and one person can unbreak things so that they were never broken.

One of Kate's favorite stories involved a character who didn't know his talent, and it turned out that his talent was that he had no talent, which meant that he had all talents. It's very convoluted but it worked.

The thing about all this is, everyone who was born and lived in Xanth had a talent of some kind. Some talents were useful, some not. Some caused envy or annoyance while still others caused big problems.

In real life, we love to see talented people do their thing, and if they are athletes who play for the right teams, we cheer them on. But when people step away from what we think they should be doing, we tend to resent or resist this new thing they're trying to do. This happened when Bob Dylan went electric in 1965. At the Newport Folk Festival that year, he played acoustic guitar and sang a bunch of folk songs in the first half of his set, then took a short break. He came back out carrying an electric guitar, had a whole new band with him, and played rock 'n' roll. The crowd booed him. They felt betrayed.

Bob Dylan would not be pigeon-holed. But he had unwittingly broken the unity of his community of followers even as he diversified his music and eventually reached a new audience. Today's reading from First Corinthians addresses one aspect of diversity, that it can cause disunity when gifts determine rank and lead to establishing hierarchy in the community. Bob Dylan found out fast just what his folk fans thought of rock 'n' roll, just as Paul found out the hard way that some people in his young church considered themselves better than others, and that just didn't sit well with him.

Paul first visited Corinth in the exact middle of the first century and stayed in the city for about eighteen months. During that time, he and his co-workers, people such as Timothy, Priscilla, Phoebe, established several small house churches which came together every now and then as 'the church' to celebrate the Lord's Supper. First and Second Corinthians record Paul's responses to multiple problems causing conflict in the faith community, including the mis-use of spiritual gifts. The surviving correspondence represents a composite of up to *nine* separate letters.

Corinth was a wealthy city, religiously diverse, and Roman. But Corinth was also a great place to plant a church, because it supported several pagan cults, Greek philosophers, synagogues, and, now, Christians. Each group seemed to get along with all the rest. The trouble, according to Paul's letters, came from within.

When Paul says, 'Now concerning spiritual things' – not gifts, but things – it's because he's been concerned with other issues up to now, and he's changing gears to deal with another problem. And when he says 'uninformed,' he really means ignorant, not because they've never heard of these things before but because they lack the wisdom to know what he's talking about, mostly due to their pagan past – this Jesus stuff is all new.

So, before Paul speaks about the variety of gifts, he gives two examples to show the church that not all religious experiences are Christian, and how to tell the difference. As far as he is concerned, only that which comes from the Holy Spirit can point to Jesus. The gifts he describes next are not meant to be a comprehensive, exhaustive list; if you don't like this one, he has another in Romans 12. And it wasn't meant to be static, either. Later Christian writers further expanded and modified Paul's list. Christianity is a living, learning faith.

The point is, Paul is not making this up; these are familiar concepts. But most of the gifts mentioned here happen to be characteristic of Jesus Christ: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, doing miracles, and prophecy. For Paul, the gifts of the Spirit are complementary to each other and wide-ranging in their scope. Furthermore, these gifts are all meant for the common good.

And that was part of the problem. In Corinth, certain members of the church were using their alleged talents to enhance and assert their power within the group. Supposedly, speaking in tongues was a high-status ability. In truth, a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit is a gift to the whole community and should not be used as a status symbol. Also, the Holy Spirit bestows gifts on everyone, on all Christians, not just an elite few. All gifts come from the Spirit and no one gift is superior to another.

While all gifts are given by the Spirit to help build up the church, there is a need for a diversity of gifts. So, we're talking about both the unity of the source and the diversity of purpose, and it all comes from God. This is what Paul was trying to get across. He said, if you proclaim Jesus as Lord, the Holy Spirit comes to you. He said, spiritual gifts are for the good and the use of the entire community; so, don't hide your light under a basket. And, he said, all gifts are given by the grace of God; we're meant to have them.

In the passage from John's Gospel, the steward knows the wine the servants offer him is excellent, but he doesn't know the source and he doesn't know that it is a sign of God's grace. He *does* know that we often can't tell a good wine from a bad one after we've drunk too much of either, and this could mean that somehow, we've dulled our perception of the better things in life.

John's story of the wedding at Cana includes several themes that all have something to do with how God is at work in the world. There is a sense of urgency in this story. Mary sees an impending disaster and wants Jesus to do something about it right now. Mary knows that the world needs to see the glory of God revealed now.

When Jesus responds by changing the water into wine, he's showing us two things. One, that his first sign is a gift, given in the middle of a festive occasion where people are happy, in community, extending hospitality, and looking toward the future. Secondly, God's grace is in abundance in the form of hundreds of gallons of wine.

What Jesus did at the wedding was a sign that pointed beyond the miracle. Earlier, John wrote, ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory.’ Here’s the first glimpse of that glory. No one at the wedding *deserved* better wine – they were all drunk – but Mary *insisted* that Jesus solve a potentially embarrassing problem for the friend who had invited them to the party. And so, he does, and it’s a gift and a blessing.

John leaves us with both a sense of wonder and with some things to think about. Jars reserved for ritual purification are suddenly filled with excellent wine. What did the chief steward and the bridegroom think of that? Were they aware of the source or just surprised and grateful? Did the disciples know about it, or were the only witnesses Mary and the servants? In this story, those to whom God’s glory is revealed respond with belief and the rest of us respond with wonder.

None of us can or should try to do it all, and as a church, we can’t solve every problem of the world. But that should not affect how we respond to God and neighbor. Maybe, as a church, we should follow Jesus’ lead and work to promote abundant wholeness through advocacy, service, outreach – expanding on what we already do – and also to seek imaginative solutions to the problems we see in the wider community – homelessness, hunger, addiction.

Spiritual gifts are similar to the wine at the wedding. Jesus bestowed a great gift on the host family for the benefit of all the people at the celebration. As Paul said, let us give thanks to God for the diversity of gifts given to this congregation, and may we use them to discern where next the Holy Spirit is leading us.

Amen.