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This is the time of year that has a lot of us thinking about gifts. Buying Christmas gifts, giving and receiving them, and returning gifts that don't work or don't fit. Now we're practically on the eve of Valentine's Day when, according to advertisers, stores, and Hallmark, we're supposed to give our loved ones even more gifts.

So it's a good day to talk about gifts – but in this case, I mean spiritual gifts, not overpriced roses and diamonds. Often in his letters, Paul focuses extensively on two things – the Holy Spirit and community. In today's passage from Corinthians, we get a twofer – he focuses on both at the same time, and in a unique way by employing an extended, and pretty funny, metaphor about the body.

Before I start, I need to remind you of the last line of last week's reading, 1 Corinthians verse 12, which reads:

"All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses."

The reason we need to include this is because this entire section today is shaped by Verse 12, by Paul's use of the conjunction "for" or "because."

So the first three verses could read:

Verse 12: All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, for 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.

Verse 13: All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, for 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.

Verse 14: All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, for indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

The concept that Paul is trying to get across to his beloved but cantankerous Corinthians is that, even though we all have different functions and different gifts, all our gifts have been given us by the one God, through his one Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit and Community – Paul's mantra.

He then goes on with his body metaphor, cautioning the more "important" parts of the body that they shouldn't get all full of themselves. Not only are the "weaker" parts of the body indispensable, Paul says, but they should be afforded even more respect, not less. This represents a split from Paul's philosophical understanding, which would have the entire body governed by the most important member. But Paul is nothing if not egalitarian!

Before I became an opera singer and spent my time ON the stage, I was a Stage Manager. In fact, that's what my undergraduate degree is in – Technical Theater. And let me tell you, after I became a performer I was VERY respectful of the behind-the-scenes people! Anyone who thinks that they, as an actor, are more important than, say, the spotlight operator or the props mistress, should try ticking one off one day.

There's an apocryphal but hilarious tale of a performance of Puccini's Tosca where the soprano had apparently been rude to the stage hands – the same people who were supposed to catch her after she jumps off of the parapet at the end of the opera. The disgruntled stagehands decided to get even and they, the story goes, replaced her landing pads with a trampoline. Reportedly, she bounced up for several encores.

Just as everyone involved in a theatrical production is equally important, Paul tells us that even more so is everyone in the Body of Christ important, no matter what their gifts may be. He also cautions us against being jealous of other people's gifts, since ours are just as important and just as vital to the work of the Spirit. In fact, jealousy over other people's gifts is one of the silliest things we could ever waste our time with.

I used to think of myself as something of a linguist. I've been studying languages since 9th grade and at one time during college I was taking German, French, and Spanish classes at the same time and doing pretty well at them. I've always considered my facility with languages to be one of my gifts, so I thought learning Greek would not only be a snap, but that people would be amazed at my prowess. Okay, I was a little anxious about starting seminary, so my imagination ran a bit wild.

Enter Michael Drinkwater, one of my classmates, who's now at the Cathedral in Albuquerque. Michael's language abilities made me look like a blind bat with a Berlitz book. Before he got to seminary, he had taught himself all of the European languages, Latin, Russian, and I think, Chinese. Not only was he taking Greek, but he was taking Biblical Hebrew as well, and by the end of our time at General was also dabbling in Coptic. You BET I was jealous! That was supposed to be MY gift!

But it was a waste of time and energy to be jealous. Michael was gifted certainly, but so was I. So were all of us. God has given each of us – Michael, me, you – gifts that are uniquely needed in the service each of us has been called to. Unfortunately, as with actors in the theater, our society puts a value standard on certain gifts and denigrates others, so we have to be aware of that pressure all around us.

Which brings me to discernment. One of the best ways to keep ourselves from falling into either trap – either putting down those gifts perceived to be less important or being jealous of the gifts of others – is to be doing exactly what God has planned for each of us to do. And the way to do that, besides falling into something by sheer dumb luck, is discernment.

Discernment is just a churchier word for "figuring things out." And figuring out our spiritual gifts and how to use them involves prayer, help from community, maybe trying things out, and more prayer. It involves listening to God and to what the other members of the Body are telling us. It can be a joyous experience, especially when you really know in your heart what it is that the Spirit would have you do in the service of God. So true to Paul, discernment is all about the Holy Spirit and community.

This idea is especially appropriate this morning, because we're holding our Annual Meeting today. Not to give anything away, but I discernment will definitely come up during the meeting today and I hope it will be in everyone's mind in the coming weeks and months.

Each of us has something special to offer. It may not be what you think at first. When I was first discerning my call to the priesthood I thought that my singing, directing, and performing experience would be what I had to offer. And so it is, but those things are not as important as some of the other things I bring to the table. However, I never would have figured this out without a lengthy discernment process involving many members of my various communities along the way.

Keeping in mind the Holy Spirit, community, and the importance of each and every member of the Christ's Body, I'd like to leave you with one last thought from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It's about the concept of Ubuntu. For those of you who may not have heard of Ubuntu, it's a Zulu word that's a little hard to translate into English. Maybe the closest translation would be the ethical idea of human interconnectedness, of community. Archbishop Tutu says:

"Ubuntu…is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours'. A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."

So let's let this spirit of Ubuntu, of oneness and mutual respect, carry us through our meeting today, through our discernment in the upcoming weeks and months, and through our life together as the Body of Christ, each with our own unique gifts, to be used in his service.

Amen.