

First Friends Church, a Quaker Meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
September 12, 2021
Abundant Gifts

Readings

I Cor 12:4-12 (selected)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ...To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... wisdom... knowledge...faith... healing... miracles... prophecy... discernment of spirits...tongues... interpretation of tongues... The same Spirit... allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. 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.

Galatians 5:22-23, 26 (selected)

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another.

Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts, and then thou wilt feel the principle of God to turn thy mind to the Lord God, whereby thou wilt receive God's strength and power from whence life comes, to allay all tempests, against blusterings and storms. That is it which moulds up into patience, into innocency, into soberness, into stillness, into stayedness, into quietness, up to God, with God's power.

George Fox, 1658

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say "It is I you have been looking for," and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

— Naomi Shihab Nye, from "Kindness"

Message

As I was thinking about abundant gifts I wondered, "What is the difference between Spirit's gifts and fruits?" Paul's letters to the Galatians and the

Corinthians give us two lists. Gifts are: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing,

miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits and languages. Fruits are: love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Both are desirable and intended to benefit the community.

As I explored the difference became clear. The Spirit chooses specific gifts for specific individuals. One blessing of community is if you or I don't have a particular gift from the Spirit, we have a Friend who does. They may even be able to teach it to us. Our faith, wisdom, healing or computer gifts may be weak, but we can find a Friend who will encourage us. We may never become an expert but we don't have to. We have been given other gifts to bring to support the community.

Fruits of the Spirit on the other hand, are available to all of us. They may be enhanced or enlarged by using our gifts, but a fruit of the Spirit is not something we do. It is something we become and they come as the Spirit grows within us. This was not easy for me to understand until the analogy of a tree came to me.

A tree's gifts are the ability to absorb water from the ground, to parse out the nutrients from the soil, to take in CO₂ and sunlight and to convert all this into growth of a tall, healthy and beautiful tree with branches and leaves, magnificent in splendor. The trees' gifts are also the ability to provide shade, to anchor the soil, and to provide limbs that support nests. But then, with peace and patience the tree grows its' "fruit". It starts with a flower, joyfully enhancing the beauty not just of the tree but of everything around it. The flower gently and kindly gives bees pollen and in a loving process is converted into a food to feed others. The seed that comes from the food then increases the reach of the tree as it starts the cycle all over

again. Now the tree is not just standing still and growing. It is transformed beyond itself- by the seed/fruit that comes from becoming a generous and fruit-ful tree.

The abundant gifts of the Spirit are made for doing. They are very useful tools for the tasks of living and ministry. We need and celebrate these gifts. They are the beginning. But fruit is the sign of the Spirit's presence within us. Love, joy, faithfulness and peace are evidence of being transformed.

Friends don't speak about gifts and fruits as much as we do testimonies. But there seems to be confusion about what testimonies are. Are they things we believe- values, things we do- gifts, or things we are- fruit and character? Where have you seen Friends who embody the testimonies in who they are? Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Equality, Service, and Stewardship-is it possible for anyone to embody all of them? Perhaps each of us live out one testimony better some days than others. There is good, better and the ideal.

Good Simplicity is focusing on what is important and removing excess from our life that distracts us from a healthy life. But we seek the true Simplicity which is seen in living first, foremost and always focused on God. Peace inside is good, and adding peace with family and friends is better. The ideal Peace is living a life that "takes away all occasion for war," violence, anger, argument and self- doubt, and truly loving our enemies as ourselves in word and action.

Good Integrity means being honest and fair in our interactions and relationships. Ideal Integrity is living a totally transparent life with God and yourself, when your outsides match your insides. Living the testimony of Equality requires not just treating others the way you want to be treated, but the way they want to be treated. It is not just seeing God in everyone, or not seeing “color” in our meeting or on our streets. It is a way of living that removes the barriers for everyone to a life of flourishing in every aspect of life; identity, family, education, housing, employment, leadership and governance.

Stewardship and Service can be seen as twins and are sometimes given short attention. A good steward serves well in the Owners’ absence, but better Stewardship and Service require we share, nourish and grow the blessings we are entrusted, including each other. Since each of us is given different gifts the only way to do this is in community with all the other stewards on the planet. Which brings me back: to abundant gifts, the common good, competition, envy and community. It might be that the hardest testimony of all is Community.

All the Spirit’s gifts and all the other testimonies can be done as an “individual sport”- from an individualistic place, in a time of introspection and self- work. But the testimony of Community can’t. It takes the cooperation of at least one somebody else. It requires us to let down our barriers, to reach out, to

engage with another, to help another grow and become, and to allow and that to happen to and for us as well.

Perhaps that is why God created us- for Community with God and with and each other. One of the most important things I learned from my Muslim friends in interfaith dialogue is this verse from the Qu’ran that describes diversity as a gift of God. *“O humankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.”*¹ We celebrate the abundant gifts we have in the diversity of Friends in our meeting, and use the gifts we build the Beloved community in our world. As we do this we all continue our transformation and growth in the fruits of the Spirit.

Yesterday we recognized twenty years since a day of terrible violence led to a choice toward twenty years of violence, which unfortunately continues today in Afghanistan and in the minds of the soldiers and refugees. As we zoom from all of our different locations including the meetinghouse, we recognize this week is officially 18 months since we closed our meetinghouse. We continue to mark the pandemic in emotional isolation, disrupted community, damaged bodies and lives. But George Fox advised: “Be still and cool in thy own mind and spirit from thy own thoughts” and God’s strength and power in tempests, blusterings and storms

¹ Qur’an 49:13

“will mould up into patience, into innocency, into soberness, into stillness, into stayedness, to quietness.” In Naomi Nye’s words, “before we know kindness as the deepest thing inside, we must know sorrow as the deepest thing.” As we share our abundant gifts in Community in troubled times we are also transformed from people who work to be good Christians to Friends whose fruits embody the Spirit of Christ.

I read a story about running a marathon. When you start training, you can find a supportive group and get advice on the basics. But running is really an individual sport. Once the race starts you set your own pace, keep track of the markers, maybe hear cheers from the crowd, but essentially you are on your own.

The author advised that she will be walking her second marathon. She was using it as a metaphor for all the activities churches and individuals might rush into post pandemic. But I think it is a good advice in using the gifts and living the fruits of the Spirit together.

“... we have the opportunity to tell the truth, to slow the pace, and question everything... Ready or not... Maybe the answer is to stop running... What if we looked at each other and gently nodded. Slowed our forced jog. And started walking. Together. Side by side. No racing. No competing with anything or anyone. Resting when it's time to rest. Saying yes to a new idea when it glistens with possibility. Saying no when something feels too heavy. Asking new questions

in places we assumed the old answer. Giving others permission to rest ...
Questioning the speed at which we live... Loving our people with beautiful
boundaries in place... Breathing deeply of God's grace and love and restoration.
Maybe this is how we disrupt the deeply engrained oppressive realities of our
world. We choose to walk. Together. Here's to the second marathon.... I'll be over
in the slow walkers crew that laughs and takes a lot of breaks.... I imagine Love
will surprise us again.”²

This is what I have seen Friend doing over this past 18 months, more and
more; enjoying, celebrating, sharing, teaching, mentoring and growing our gifts
and becoming fruit-full together. We have stopped seeing life outside and in our
meeting as a competitive race and instead we are walking together. Thank you
Friends.

² <https://www.jennysmithwrites.com/post/the-second-marathon-a-word-for-pastors-on-walking-the-new-normal>