

“WHAT GIFT TO YOU BRING?”
1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-11; Mark 1:16-20
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Sr Barbara Kearny-Schupp was my daughter Jessie's 2nd grade teacher, and the most gifted educator I have ever known. She grew up in the mid-west, third daughter down in a Catholic family of 13 children, and from the time she was in first grade, her favorite activity was to play school. She would line up dolls, or stuffed animals, or siblings in hastily constructed desks in front of her and teach them. When she was 12, she became sure her vocation for teaching came from God, and from that point on, she knew she was headed for religious orders. She joined the Sisters of Joseph of Peace at the age of 18, and fortunately in her 30s came to teach 2nd grade in a small neighborhood Catholic school in Seattle called St Benedict's.

Sr Barbara was a creative and loving teacher. For social studies, mathematics, and language arts first semester, she had all her students move their desks to the perimeter of the room, and in the middle, they built a town. First the students decided what kinds of buildings had to be in a town, and they built them out of cardboard, paper, and foam core. Then there was the placement of buildings and the need for roads. A transportation committee was formed. Newly named Tiny Town needed local governance, so students wrote speeches to campaign for mayor and three city council positions. Then, while the mayor and counselors were hard at work writing laws, other groups of children pondered the question of city services and how to pay for them, and necessary cultural opportunities. That was the Fall. Spring semester Sr Barbara took all the children on a tour of the UW hospital ward where the drug-addicted (mostly crack) babies are, and then she enlisted parents to teach all the children to crochet. A half hour a day they crocheted while Sr Barbara read aloud. They made blankets for the babies, and were given a special award by the mayor of Seattle. The next year her class put on a performance of A Midsummer Night's Dream, rewritten for 2nd graders. Sr Barbara: one of God's beloveds, incredible gifts for God's people.

And then there's Willie. Willie was a member of my church in Duluth. He was the first person I ever met with a cauliflower ear. Had he been given an IQ test, he would probably have scored as developmentally disabled. But he functioned quite well. He had a job running the elevator at the local office tower; he had a room in an inexpensive boarding house; and every Sunday, he put on his suit, came to church, and did his job. You see, there was a notch cut out of the middle back pews for the minister to stand in to deliver the benediction. But it didn't work so well for the offering. Every Sunday for 67 years, Willie came to church and took up his very important post in the notch during the offering, and passed the plates from one side to the other.

My friend Hazel was a wonderful cook and a great storyteller, but you want to know her greatest gift? She had the ability to go into a home in crisis because of a death, a run-away child, or a

serious illness, she could go into any home and make herself virtually invisible while she cooked and cleaned and tended fearful or grieving souls. I could never convince her that this was indeed a true gift, to be able to take up so little emotional space that people didn't notice the stranger in their home. She often grumbled that she wondered what other talent she got passed over for in order to get this. But I can't number the times that her special skill made a real difference in people's lives.

Then there was my friend Jerre, the Episcopal priest. Jerre was a very good priest in many ways, but where he shone was in his voice. His was a beautiful clear tenor, and when he chanted the Eucharist, you knew, you absolutely knew you were in the presence of God. Jerre came to the church when I was in Middle School, And I assure you, I was not a young person anyone would have predicted as a promising candidate for spiritual experience. But when Jerre sang, I wanted to take off my shoes and fall to my knees because I knew all around me was Holy Ground.

Finally, there was a young boy who, at the age of 6, in the great state of Kansas, saw a grown-up playing a pipe organ in a church, and said to himself, "I'm going to learn to do that." At eight, he started piano lessons, but he couldn't play the organ until his legs could reach the pedals. That was in the eighth grade. He started out teaching himself, but eventually studied with an organist in Atchison. Those studies didn't last very long though. Said organist up and moved, leaving his 16 year-old student to take over his post at the Episcopal church in Atchison. That was in 1949, and now, for 60 years, Myles Criss has served his God, and inspired and delighted God's people as a professional church musician: playing the organ, directing choirs, planning and arranging special musical events, bringing us closer to God in the way that only music can touch our hearts and stir our souls. Myles, we celebrate you today and the very special gifts that you have given to the glory of God.

But our worship today would be incomplete if it were just about Myles. It's not. I find myself compelled by the thought of a six year old hearing the organ, and saying "that's mine!" How many of you had thoughts like that at that age. Rare. But all of us are led in a variety of ways to find the particular gifts with which we honor God and serve God's people. One of the things I love about the congregational tradition, our tradition in this church, is this particular church's insistence from its very earliest days in the 16th century on taking seriously Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 12: that we, who are God's people, are given all manner of gifts. Just as importantly, all those gifts are of equal significance, whether playing the organ or playing with the children, whether serving the homeless at stone soup or serving communion, planting churches or planting fields, those who keep the books and those who keep the faith, fix the leaky faucets and keep company with the dying, those who give us art, and music and flowers, those who mend and tend and sew, and one of my most favorite gifts, those who are able to inspire people in good and useful meetings where you leave feeling like you really accomplished something.

Every one of us here has something important to bring to this community of the church and to the larger communities in which we live. And in some cases, like with my daughter's teacher Sr Barbara, or Mr. Myles at the organ, those gifts will shine bright and be easily recognized, or they might be like faithful Willie's in Duluth, he who passed his plates every week—quiet, steadfast, unremarked. Some of you here, I know, are like my friend Hazel and think your particular gifts don't amount to much, and you would rather have been given something else. But you are wrong.

Every work that is useful, every work that is beautiful, every work that holds or heals or supports or builds: all of them give glory to God and contribute to the life of God's people. So as you leave worship today, and go out into Gatton hall to eat cake and further celebrate Myles Criss day, along with Myles, give a thought to others you have known, those whose talents were visible and those whose gifts were quiet, those at home with their skills and those who discount their contributions, and eat a bite to cake for them as well. I know Myles won't be offended, because one of the things I love most about him is his ability to appreciate the wholeness of the community, all those whose contributions are entirely different from his. So this day we do celebrate Myles's extraordinary 60 year's service; we celebrate all the gifts of all God's people come together to weave the community whole. And above all, we give glory to God, from whom come all gifts. Thanks be to God. Amen.