

A Community of Risk Takers
January 25, 2015
I Corinthians 12:1, 4-12, 25-27 (The Message)

Everyone has something to offer; we all have spiritual gifts that can help strengthen our congregation. The twelfth chapter of 1 Corinthians speaks to just this topic. Rather than following along in the pew Bibles, I invite you to listen as I read from *The Message*.

What I want to talk about now is the various ways God's Spirit gets worked into our lives. This is complex and often misunderstood, but I want you to be informed and knowledgeable.

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate in God's Spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all.

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is: Everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits. All kinds of things are handed out by the Spirit, and to all kinds of people! The variety is wonderful: wise counsel clear understanding simple trust healing the sick miraculous acts proclamation distinguishing between spirits tongues interpretation of tongues.

All these gifts have a common origin, but are handed out one by one by the one Spirit of God. He decides who gets what, and when.

You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts - limbs, organs, cells - but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ.

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.

You are Christ's body - that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these ancient words.

Let us pray . . . Giver of all good gifts, we know that you have given each of us spiritual gifts not for us to hold onto but rather for us to share freely with others. Take and use the words that Jim, Barb, David, and I will speak to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Our culture teaches us the importance of starting well each New Year. People tend to take New Year's resolutions very seriously – at first.

While most resolutions are truly good ideas, often our motivation is inadequate to sustain our efforts. One study found that after just one week, only 75% of those making resolutions were still committed to achieving them. By the time January ends in a few days, the number will drop to 64%. Amazingly, when the year ends, only 8% will actually achieve their New Year's resolutions.¹

I won't ask you to publically share whatever resolutions you have made for 2015 or just how successful you have been with keeping prior resolutions. I will, however, assume most of you have significant experience in this area.

I also suspect most of you are accustomed to making annual stewardship pledges to your church. And, many of the snowbirds among us, have faithfully pledged to multiple churches each year.

Stewardship pledges are a lot like New Year's Resolutions.

- They begin around the same time of year.
- They are – at least ideally – made after careful consideration.
- They require real commitment and genuine focus.

Stewardship pledges are also nothing like New Year's resolutions.

- They are about building God's realm on earth rather than improving something about ourselves.
- They require us to use gifts we already have rather than create something we don't yet have.
- They are designed to be made in Christian community and before God rather than on our own with casual mention to a few friends.

Stewardship is a whole life experience. It means caring for all that we are and all that we have with a recognition that everything entrusted to our oversight ultimately belongs to God.

Today our stewardship focus is on time and talent. Each of us has spiritual gifts that are needed here within this community of faith, a body we call Fort Myers Congregational United Church of Christ.

Three members of our congregation have agreed to share reflections about their experiences of giving of their time and talent. As you listen to their stories, I encourage you to consider your own.

(Jim Boler, Barb Coons, and David Shaw offer testimonials)

Thank you. Thanks Jim, Barb, and David. I appreciate not only that you said “yes” when presented an opportunity to speak, but also the many ways you have given generously of your time and talent.

Together we are inviting you to join with us for the year ahead by committing to risk-taking mission and service. This is one of the five practices of fruitful congregations. The author of the book that has helped frame our thinking about the strengths of our own congregation defines the term in this way:

Vibrant, fruitful, growing congregations practice Risk-Taking Mission and Service. Risk-Taking Mission and Service includes the projects, the efforts, and work people do to make a positive difference in the lives of others for the purposes of Christ, whether or not they will ever be a part of the community of faith.¹

When a group gathered earlier this week to talk about personal experiences of risk-taking mission and service we returned again and again to the modifying term: risk-taking. It is an invitation to step out of your comfort zone as you give of yourself.

With this in mind I invite you to find the pledge card in your worship bulletin. Let’s look at the card together.

The top half begins with critically important words: “being a part of a church means sharing your time and talent with others.” It then provides several broad categories of possibilities for your involvement this year. There is no limit to the number you can select. Check off all you are already involved in or are interested in, then circle any that will be new commitments for the coming year.

¹ Robert Schnase. *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* (2011), p.83.

You can also write in any special skills you have that may prove helpful, like calligraphy, photography, or carpentry.

Be sure to print your name and contact information so that we can follow up with you. Place your completed cards in the baskets in the Narthex today or drop them by the church office any time.

In 2015, we need you to be your part and do your part. Seasonal or annual, young or old, member or friend, all are invited to offer something of themselves for the coming year.

As you consider your pledge, remember our Scripture reading:

You are Christ's body - that's who you are! You must never forget this. Only as you accept your part of that body does your "part" mean anything.

Amen.