

## God's Favorite People

I Corinthians 12:1-11

*(preached September 22, 2024)*

Good morning. I was travelling in the Midwest last week, and missed the service Sunday. I was pleased and a bit surprised to learn that I had been recognized for being one of the many people in this congregation who have contributed to worship services here and at Armbrook. I appreciate it, truly. *Pleased*, because, well, it is nice to be called out in a positive way. *Surprised*, because a look at the calendar tells me that I had been away from Southampton for over 50 years, only returning a year and a half ago. How quickly this church – which wasn't even the church I grew up in - has become "home", and how seamlessly all of you have welcomed a stranger from the past into the fold. This small but mighty congregation exudes the gift of hospitality, welcoming newcomers with warmth and open arms, something that is a bit of a rarity these days. It is your gift, and I thank you all for that. So perhaps in your generosity you will forgive me for my repetitive choice of scripture.

This morning's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians will sound very familiar to any of you who were in church last Sunday. I had chosen it some time ago and think that it bears repeating. This New Testament scripture celebrates the gifts of the spirit. Some of them sound quite grand. Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophesy, and speaking and understanding tongues. All, Paul tells us, are gifts to be used in an effort to illuminate the common good, the common understanding of the teachings of Jesus, and our mission to share those gifts and knowledge. The unspoken commonality here of course, is love, in many of its varieties.

Love within the church and love reaching out to the wider community. Love as *Agape* – an unconditional love that is selfless and universal. Said like that, the concept seems huge, unreachable. For how many of us can live up to that standard? The temptation is to turn away from potentially failing at the task rather than to risk stumbling and being seen as ineffective or unproductive. But by breaking down the gifts of the spirit into multiple and varied categories, (bite sized pieces, if you will) Paul is making them more available and approachable, encouraging us to meet those gifts on whatever level we are able to respond.

Maybe this was the start of church committees – do what you can, a piece at a time! We are blessed to be a part of a church community that has a natural understanding of that process. Instead of "bigger is better", or "dominance is the key", or "the one with the most money when they die, wins", try looking through a smaller lens, and turning it all around. If you can't supply every child with a present at Christmas, then share the load. Take a tag from the Giving Tree and choose to brighten the day of one child. If you can't feed everyone who is hungry, donate a can of soup or a tin of tuna to the Pantry. If you can't deliver wholesome fresh vegetables to all who need them, grow a little garden and offer its bounty up to whoever can use it. Abraham Lincoln understood the value of small kindnesses when he said that "*No man stands so tall as when he stoops to help a child.*" Even Gandalf the Hobbit got the message – he intoned "*I found that it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the Darkness at bay. Small acts of Kindness and Love*". I came across a similar sentiment in the concept of Quiet Help. "*we can all recognize quiet help when we see it. Quiet help is what we witness when we see a stranger helping another stranger reach something on the high*

*shelf at the supermarket. Quiet help is found in volunteerism. Quiet help can be found in financial donations, when there are few beans to ration, but they are rationed nonetheless. Quiet help is a kind word. Quiet help is where we find true happiness, it is the place we go to turn our positive energies outward. More than all of these, quiet help is giving of ourselves without expectation of something in return.”*

So how do we make this happen in our day to day life? Is there a secret to finding the potential that we carry inside and to allowing it to grow and thrive like the vegetables in the garden at the base of Church Hill? A secret that finds the spark inside and shows us how to share it, to pass it on? A secret that moves Carolyn and Betty to answer to the need for clean secondary bandages, and do it willingly, with dedication and good humor. To provide food to those in need through the Pantry that Candy manages so faithfully? I believe so. Because I have a secret that I want to share with you. Are you ready? Listen closely. Okay, here goes:

**I am one of God’s favorite people.** Shocking, isn’t it. But it gets even better. YOU are one of God’s favorite people. And YOU are one of God’s favorite people. And YOU, and YOU, and YOU! By grace alone we are - each and every one of us - God’s favorite people. I’d like you to turn to your neighbors all around you and let them know the news. Tell them, right out loud “YOU are one of God’s favorite people and so am I.”

That felt pretty good, didn’t it? What is striking to me is that while there was excitement at being told , it is outweighed by the joy of letting others know, of reminding them of their uniqueness in God’s eyes. It is astounding how powerful the ripple effect of encouragement and shared love can be. So, yes indeed I am one of God’s favorite people. And so are you .

For God’s favorite people, for each one touched by the Spirit, it is Christmas morning, every morning. Every time we wake from our night’s sleep. Every time we open our eyes to a new dawn, to a new opportunity to find our gift. Someone took our tag off the giving tree and left us a *roomful* of presents. A smorgasbord of potential to go out and do some good in the world. Yet how often do we waste that moment, frittering away the opportunity to make that small difference in someone’s life and breaking the fragile vase that holds the budding promise of our service. In our neglect, smashing the hopes that we nurture to fulfill our promise in the world. Can you imagine God looking down and shaking their head as if to say, “See? This is why we can’t have nice things!” Well, here is another bit of good news: every day, we get the opportunity to start with a clean slate. Every morning starts with the prospect of new understanding, new purpose, new determination to make the best use of whatever gifts of the Spirit that we have been entrusted with.

Paul wouldn’t have had a concept of “Christmas”. It was nearly 300 years after his ministry before the holiday came into practice in Rome. But he certainly understood *gifts*. He understood that no one person has every gift of the Spirit to share. We all have a piece of that gift, a piece perhaps yet undiscovered even to ourselves. God won’t give up on us as we keep trying, as we keep searching for how we fit into the grand puzzle of life. God has our back. For YOU and YOU and YOU and YOU - are all God’s favorite people.

AMEN

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