

Finding Hidden Talents

Devotion

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10).

As their pastor, I serve a congregation which includes many people with special needs of mind, body, and soul. Each of these people is unique, with his or her own needs and challenges, strengths, and abilities. They are the “normal” members of our congregation. We also minister to a large community of people with developmental disabilities, each one unique, with her or his own abilities and strengths, challenges and needs. Each has their own God-given gifts and talents. Many of these talents and gifts are quite obvious. Many are, well, surprises!

Three weeks after my family and I arrived at our new congregation, 24 years ago, we held a Christmas gathering for more than 250 people with developmental disabilities and their care-givers. This gathering was complete with a nativity pageant with characters played by those with disabilities, an angel choir (it was, in its own way, glorious) a Christmas dinner, served to each attendee, and Santa and his helpers who distributed a gift, specially chosen for each person by members of our congregation. It was, and continues to be, a beautiful part of Christmas.

However, that first Christmas gathering was quite troubling for our seven-year-old daughter and, therefore, also for her parents. “Papa,” she said with tears streaming, “that man keeps watching me and following me.” She was so right. As she stayed closely by my side for the rest of the evening, the man did watch and he did follow. This kind of ministry, at that moment in time, didn’t feel like such a good thing.

God, in His Word, encourages *“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace”* (1 Peter 4:10). Each and every one of us, God’s children, “normal” people and people with special needs, is gifted by God with talents to be put to work in loving service of others, as we wisely employ the amazing variety of abilities which He, so freely and lovingly, pours into us. Whew!

What a joy it is to see the excitement of those with disabilities as they acolyte the candles, or usher the offerings, or lector the assigned lessons, or play the hymns on the piano (sometimes by ear), or anthem with the angel choir in worship. For others with special needs, using their talent includes singing karaoke (“The Lord’s Prayer” or “Your Cheatin’ Heart”), dancing high-stepping dances alone or with others, calling bingo numbers, or helping to serve and eat the refreshments and goodies for an evening gathering.

God has given to us, His church, the opportunity and call to help each and every person discover and unwrap the gifts, and mine and develop the talents that He has spread in the hearts and lives of His people. He has graciously awarded these gifts and talents for the building up of the church, to provide a way for individuals to respond to His gift of a Savior, to affirm that our faith in Jesus is living, and to give those who do not yet believe an opportunity to see the love of Christ at work in our midst and into the world. Again, whew!

Did I mention surprises? Because these talents and gifts are not always obvious but often hidden, particularly in those with special needs, there are indeed, sometimes, heart-touching eureka discoveries to be revealed when seeking and encouraging people to use their God-provided gift-treasures.

Days after that troubling first Christmas party for our folks with developmental disabilities, we learned that the man watching and following was a truly nice, very quiet person, whose little sister, living in another city, looked just like our daughter. We and she had no reason to ever worry about him.

There was yet another epiphany to be discovered as we headed out the entryway of our church building following that Christmas party. “Papa, look!” our daughter squealed with delight. There, at the feet of our Sears and Roebuck catalog nearly life-sized statue of Jesus, someone, with the gift and talent of helping and caring, had served a plate of food for his or her Savior, who was born on the first Nativity, suffered and died on Good Friday, and rose again on the first Easter, to serve and to save us all! How’s that for being a good steward of God’s varied grace?

Closing Prayer: Gracious, generous God, thank You for the innumerable gifts, talents, and abilities which You pour out on all Your people! By the power and working of the Holy Spirit, help us, Your church, to discover and unwrap their gifts, and mine and develop the talents which You have provided for the benefit of Your people and for Your own glory. Especially we praise You for the gift of Your Son, our Savior Jesus, for all that He has done for us for our salvation, and for all the good things He continues to do in our lives. In the name of that Son, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

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