

Pentecost Sunday  
June 12, 2011  
Reverend Julio Cruz-Natal, Pastor  
Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13, Acts 2:1-21, John 20:19-23*

### The gifts of the Holy Spirit

Take a good look at the list of gifts of the Holy Spirit in the reading from 1 Corinthians and you'll realize what an amazing inventory of talents it is. You get knowledge, which can simply be defined as capacity to know many things. And then you have wisdom, which is then, I think, the ability to use what you know. Faith is a very interesting thing to call a "gift." I have the suspicion that many of us assume that we "have faith" and don't necessarily think about it as something we receive as a gift from God. The gift of healing is often associated with doctors, but if we were intent on it, maybe we could bring healing to others in other different ways. When talking about miracles, do not limit your scope to the amazing acts of power we often find in the Bible. As with healing, miracles comes in all sort of shapes and forms. Prophecy doesn't have anything to do with foretelling the future, but the ability to see God's actions in the midst of our present time. And then the gifts of speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues, which for obvious reasons have to work together.

All of these are pretty cool and because we all have received from the Holy Spirit according to the will of God, we all have a chance to do any one or more of these gifts. There's one though, that I think is the most difficult one to dominate or practice and which I have kept for the end. I'm referring to the gift of discernment. In the dictionary it is defined as the ability to judge well. The reason I think it is a difficult gift to master is because the ability of any one of us to judge, to decide, to discern correctly will always be affected, clouded by the uncertainty of our sin. That makes it, in my mind, not only difficult to manage, but also the most powerful among the gifts of the Spirit.

And indeed this is a pretty awesome list of talents, isn't it? They are all about power and might. About being able to do incredible things. On this day of Pentecost, we seem to define the presence of the Holy Spirit by the presence (or absence) of such gifts. We seem to think that the Spirit of God is present when we have acquired the ability to do things that go beyond our own limited power. Which then makes me wonder, if we are not seeing an array of amazing displays of power, do we assume that the Holy Spirit is not there? How do we know that we have received the Holy Spirit?

We do well to be careful in the ways we understand the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is about more than just miracles and displays of power. The ability to do things that go beyond human understanding is at best a limited understanding of the action of the Spirit. To understand and identify God's presence and work among us, we have to go deeper than that. Take another look at 1 Corinthians 12 and you'll find in the seventh verse a pretty important way to measure the action of the Holy Spirit in us. It says: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good.*" Now, at first impression that

may look like a pretty simple thing but by taking a closer look you'll see that it is mighty important.

You see, the people at the church of Corinth had a problem. There was division among them which you all have probably heard about from the first chapter of the letter. And part of that division had to do with a discussion of who was better. Who is doing the true work of God? Who has the authority? Who is following the right leader? Who had the right gifts of the Spirit? Paul addresses that situation by asserting two basic and yet important points. First, it is only one Spirit that gives it all. No one's gift is better because they all come from the same source. "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the *same* Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the *same* Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the *same* God who activates all of them in everyone." It is only God and one Spirit making it happen in everybody so there's no reason to say that anyone is better than someone else. The second point in Paul's argument is that those gifts are not given for the boasting of the person, but for the benefit of the community. If what you have is not been used for the benefit of those around you, then your gift is being used for unintended purposes, is not fulfilling the will of God, essentially it is being wasted. The Spirit *is* at work in each of us. The Spirit *has given* different gifts to each of us. Those gifts can and should be *celebrated*. But more importantly, those gifts are intended to be used for the building up of the kingdom of God in our midst.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first day of Pentecost says a lot about how the Spirit is manifested. Two miracles happened that day. The first one is the most visible one. All of a sudden they were able to speak in different languages. Now, it can be pretty impressive if all of a sudden you start speaking a language you've never spoken before. That doesn't mean, though, that it is not something we can actually do with a bit of work. Here at Emanuel we can actually do that. We speak English, Spanish, German, Swedish, French and who knows what else. A more important question is, can we understand each other?

That's the second, and I believe, more impressive miracle that happens on that first Pentecost day. That in spite of the different languages all of a sudden they start talking in, they were able to understand each other. That miracle is a bit more difficult to achieve. Not because the Holy Spirit does not give us the necessary gifts but because it requires us to be willing to speak less and listen more. The contrary situation is one of the biggest problems the church has today. No matter the amount of programs, discipleship projects, evangelism efforts, stewardship campaigns or anything else we care to throw in, if we are not listening to what the other one is saying we just are not going to make it. In the end the gift of the Spirit is not that we can speak the marvels of the Gospel, but that we can speak it in such in such a way that it makes sense to our neighbor. When we do that we are then looking for the common good. When we do that we are building up the kingdom of God. And that's what the Holy Spirit does in us. Amen.