

Gifts for the Common Good

*A sermon by Alison Sampson on 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
South Yarra Community Baptist Church, 17 January 2016*

How many times have you been told to make something of yourself? To do something significant in this world? To stand on your own two feet? All through school and, for some of us, university and beyond, we are told that if we work hard and make good choices, we will achieve success. If we're struggling to work out how best to use our gifts, no worries: hundreds of books and podcasts and websites and careers counsellors are devoted to helping us achieve personal fulfilment and success.

This focus on success starts very young. When we were first looking for a primary school, our local principal lectured the gathered parents at great length on how the school would turn our four-year-olds into successful adults. (I admit that, as someone who just wanted her little one to enjoy primary school and make a few friends, after forty-five minutes I walked out and went to the next school!)

In our society, people with particular gifts are given high status: just think of the ways we honour those who are articulate, highly literate, efficient, good at hiding their feelings, or good at making money. Even Christians fall into these patterns. Every church honours some gifts more highly than others. Here, perhaps, we place a high value on the gifts of preaching, liturgy-writing, art-making, justice-seeking, contemplative prayer, and cooking soup; while some other churches might particularly honour the gifts of speaking in tongues, extemporaneous prayer, or street corner evangelism.

We all honour some gifts more highly than others; and we also honour the holders of some gifts more highly than other people. We give special status to people with particular gifts, and sometimes we even envy those people.

We live in a society in which it is all too easy to take pride in personal gifts, and all too easy to envy the gifts of others – because the world we live in believes that gifts are gifts *to* an individual.

But this is a particularly Western way to live. Behind all our assumptions about personhood and giftedness, ownership and success, lies the idea of individualism: that is, that each of us is a separate, independent, distinct person. For the most part, we assume that our beliefs and actions are not affected by other people or the world around us. And we also assume that the people around us are separate, independent, distinct individuals with whom we sometimes interact.

Because we are so embedded in this worldview, it can be hard to see it, or to see how it permeates everything that we believe and do. However, it is precisely this worldview, or this understanding of personhood, which leads us to assume that all gifts belong to individuals, whether gifts of the spirit, or other talents, or material wealth.

This view is not historically normal, nor is it even the dominant worldview today. Moreover, these assumptions about the nature of personhood may not be shared even by everyone in this room: people from different cultural backgrounds – for example, China – often form their identity, and see their role in life, through the eyes of the collective.

The ground-breaking missionary Vincent Donovan observed of that Masai people that, "No one really tried to stand out in a community, perhaps did not even want to... Talents that people possessed and displayed were accepted and recognized by the community and put to good use by the community..." In the society he observed, gifts didn't lead to the achievement and success of an individual, nor to anyone getting ahead. Instead, gifts were for the community and used by the community for the good of the community. To people with this worldview, the words of the Apostle Paul would be self-evident: all gifts are given "for the common good". But to individualists, that is, to most of us, these words are very hard to hear, and very difficult to put into action.

Because for many of us, one of the biggest obstacles to faith is its corporate nature. We are called as individuals, we make individual testimonies and professions of faith – but when we are baptised, we are baptised into the body of Christ.

At the very point of our baptism, or the reaffirmation of our baptismal vows when we come into membership, we are joined with a group of people, a group which, given half a chance, we probably wouldn't really choose. And in being bound to that group, we are bound to live in love from that day forth. That is what it means to be a baptised believer: you become a member of the body, Christ's body, and as a member of the body, you are called to serve others and serve the world.

This is why you are given gifts: gifts of wisdom, or prayer, or music-making, or discernment, or witnessing, or hospitality, or generosity, or whatever else. It is as members of the body that you are given the gifts that are needed for this body to serve in this time and this place. Your gifts are not given to you individually, for your own advancement or for your personal success. Your gifts are given to the community. As an individual, you are only the vessel for these gifts, nothing more.

For those of you who have formed your identity on the basis of your gifts, or talents, or resources, this can be very distressing: Christ does not care about your status. You are not being asked to make something of yourself, or to stand on your own two feet. You are not expected to be successful, or to use your gifts for personal fulfilment. Worse, any pride you take in your gifts is a sin, because it assumes that you have earned your gifts, when in truth they are given from God.

But to those of you who have felt the unbearable pressure to succeed, or who have felt like failures, or who cannot see a way forward; to those of you who tried to make something of yourself and saw it turn to ashes; to those of you who stand on your own two feet and are aching with loneliness: you can lay our burdens down. God doesn't love you for your achievements; God doesn't judge you for your failures; you do not need to prove yourself, or go it alone.

Instead, come, bringing the gifts that you are and the gifts that were conferred upon you at your baptism. Bring them into community, and let God use them for God's purpose. Because when God takes everyone's gifts – when God stitches all these people and all these gifts together – we form the body of Christ. Our individual achievements will never provide us with the full, rich identities that we long for, but this doesn't matter one little bit: for when we join together in worship, work and play, then Christ himself is made manifest in the world.

And paradoxically, it is precisely when we give up trying to forge our own identity, it is precisely when we submit our gifts and our selves to the body of Christ, that our true

identity will be revealed, the identity we took on when we were baptised. As the body continues to take shape and grow, we will continue to unearth new gifts, surprising gifts, in ourselves and each other. We will forge identities far richer, far more familiar and far more satisfying than anything we could have imagined for ourselves.

We are the body of Christ – His Spirit is with us – and with it comes all the giftedness and all the belonging and all the identity we could ever hope for. So now, with the words on page 18, let us exercise the gift of music as we join together, and affirm the faith of the body. Ω