

## **Special Gifts: The Case for Imperfection**

(Sermon by Craig E. Tenke on Oct. 28, 2007)

Each person on earth is unique. We differ in age, size and sex. We differ in alertness, coordination, and stamina. We differ in character, intelligence, and confidence. We differ in temperament and spirit. We prefer different things. We carry with us the imprint of our different lives and cultures. This diversity helps our species survive. If any trait turns fatal - say a susceptibility to a particular microorganism, or an overwhelming craving to consume something lethal - diversity assures that there will still be people on earth after the epidemic has run its course, or after those without self-control are all gone. Diversity also provides the pool from which individual skills are drawn to benefit society. We cannot know in advance which traits might become valuable at some time. Academic abilities and calm cooperation are quite useful today, whereas physical power and intimidation might once have been sufficient.

As Christians, what are we supposed to do with our diversity? In the parable of the talents, Jesus tells us in no uncertain terms that we must use what we have for the glory of God. The conclusion is strong, if not downright Darwinian: Those who faithfully *produce* will get *more*. Those who *aren't* productive will *lose what little they have*.

Yet Paul asks, "*Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?*" Paul goes on to explain that the Church (capital "C") *is* the Body of Christ. Like a physical body, the Church is made up of a diversity of skills and talents.

***What special gifts do you have and how should you use them for the glory of God?*** Do you have a skill or a talent that makes you happy, and maybe helps other people - either directly or indirectly? Do you have a call to service - ministry, the military, humanitarian... The arts, science, medicine, education? Are you a good worker? Do you nurture or support others? Do you make other people comfortable? Do you make people laugh? Do you make them think?

I came across a **joke news item** about a special ministry. It reads:

*Cherie Blount struggled for twenty years to try to discover her personal gifts. Finally, she concluded: she has none.*

*"I am a wonderfully non-gifted member of God's kingdom, and I'm not ashamed of that anymore," she says.*

*Blount... has used her experience to start a ministry called No Gift Required for people who have been through countless "find your gifting" and "Pathways" classes with no success. The ministry has spread to dozens of churches...*

I'm sure you get the joke, but there's a point, too. If you **don't stay anchored in Christ**, even attempts to **serve** can become distorted into an idolatrous caricature that reflects us, rather than God. What are we to offer our Lord? Over and over again in the Gospels, Jesus **rebukes** people who believe they have **done their best to be true to God**. Sometimes we completely misunderstand the wonder and uniqueness God built into each of us. Sometimes we don't **notice** that people can **feel** that we are **judging** them, even as we help them. Sometimes we don't understand that people read between the lines and infer that they're **really not very good people**, even as we **cheer them on** for a job well done.

There is also a dark side to diversity. For every talent we **identify**, we identify a corresponding **disability**. For every **gift**, we also **see a deficiency**. These sharp distinctions may be misleading. Under the right circumstances, weaknesses can become strengths, both for the individual and for the community. Consider the story of a blind man that Jesus healed. (John.9 1-5).

*As he passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."*

Later on, the cured man is questioned by the religious authorities.

*"You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.*

It ends with Jesus saying,

*"For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, "Are we also blind?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'We see,' your guilt remains.*

A disability became an asset far beyond one person. It became an instrument of hope, healing, faith - and even judgement.

There is another dimension to this story: the ancient notion that disease is divine retribution for sin. Job refuted this when even his friends tried to convince him that his life-crises may really *have* been all his fault. It was still easy to blame the victim in Jesus' time, when diseases like leprosy defined a person as being "unclean," a base sinner and an outcast from the community of the good and the faithful.

Today, we like to think of ourselves as far-removed from these primitive views of the world. We diagnose and treat diseases of, and codify therapies for, the body and the brain. Yet the root of the word "psychology" refers to what the ancients called the "spirit," and weaknesses and diseases of the "spirit" are every bit as much a problem today as they were 2000 yrs ago. Anxiety, despair, depression, suicidality, psychoses, and personality disorders are fueled by our high-pressure life-styles.

Knowledge without meaning and life without purpose provoke the kind of existential crises that once led people into the churches. Today, many leave and don't return, looking for purpose in soccer leagues and material possessions. Somehow, the churches aren't seen as the place to go for spiritual nourishment.

Traditional religious practices continue to be marginalized, while popular American culture increasingly showcases *ad hoc* caricatures of spirituality: spiritualism, psychics, and even UFOs become the roads to spiritual truth.

Somehow, the glass we see through today seems much darker than before. We see evil, and we wonder if there may be limits to the Law of Love. We wonder what Jesus *really* would do today, in this complex, hectic world.

Jesus warned us: *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. (Matthew 7)*

Which of our attributes really *are* gifts that bear fruit, and which are disabilities that bear thorns? If we aren't leaders, is there even a place for us here? I want to return to the metaphor of the Church as a body. The human brain is a powerful analytic engine composed of cells too fragile to survive by themselves. A structural and metabolic support system is in place to protect and nourish them. Thus, a fatal individual weakness is solved in the community of the body.

Some of these same fragile cells are *powerfully* connected over *long distances*. These executive cells do a great job of leading, but they're prone to *overreact*. However, there are many *smaller* cells that *antagonize almost everything* the big ones do. The overall result is that the exuberance of the leader cells is *corrected and nuanced by teamwork*.

Teams of cells like these are everywhere, and arranged like maps within maps, but the world they display is riddled with *blind spots*, *exaggerated edges*, and many *other imperfections*. Still each team contributes to *purposes far beyond* their own flawed microscopic experience, much the way that scenes of pastoral beauty can be created by French Impressionists using *bold, unrealistic brushstrokes*. In our lives, **God's purpose also provides an overarching context** for us to apply our gifts, even though the details may not be clear.

Samuel was just an *untrained child* when he was called to do something special. At first he didn't recognize God's call, but with some guidance, he prepared himself and listened. Jesus himself *sought out the needy and sinners*.

His disciples *never* quite seemed to “get it,” and were *so* unprepared for Good Friday that they *ran away* in fear and confusion. When faced with the resurrection, they were first confused, but they ultimately *doubted and questioned* their way to a *deeper faith*. This process continues to this day.

Jesus drew from the Torah when he named the greatest commandment:

*[Mark 12:29-31] 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'*

*[Mat. 22: 39-40] "And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."*

Prepare yourself to answer Gods’s call. Keep these commandments in your heart. Teach them to your children. Talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise. Bind them as a sign upon your hand, keep them in plain view and attend to them. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. [from Deut. 6: 4-9]

God *still* expects *wonderful things* from *regular people*, a kind of patchwork quilt of sparkling brilliance in a commonplace world. Search yourself faithfully, and your gifts may be special, indeed.

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Scripture Lessons

*1 Sam. 3:1-21*

*Luke 18: 9-14*

Hymns:

*"Jesus Loves me!" B #304*

*"Here I am, Lord" B #525*

*"My hope is built on nothing less" B #379*

*"What wondrous love it this" B #85*

1Sam.3

[1] Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD under Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

[2] At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim, so that he could

not see, was lying down in his own place;

[3] the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down within the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

[4] Then the LORD called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!"

[5] and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down.

[6] And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" And Samuel arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again."

[7] Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

[8] And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy.

[9] Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for thy servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

[10] And the LORD came and stood forth, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for thy servant hears."

[11] Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel, at which the two ears of every one that hears it will tingle.

[12] On that day I will fulfil against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end.

[13] And I tell him that I am about to punish his house for ever, for the iniquity which he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.

[14] Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering for ever."

[15] Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli.

[16] But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am."

[17] And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he

told you."

[18] So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD; let him do what seems good to him."

[19] And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

[20] And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD.

[21] And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

Luke.18 Verses 9 to 14

[9] He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others:

[10] "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

[11] The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

[12] I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.'

[13] But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

[14] I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."