

Gifts, Given and Shared
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
Pentecost Sunday, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A
May 11, 2008

Some of you may know that before I discerned and answered a call to the priesthood, I worked in accounting. At first, before I had children, I worked full-time in both public and then corporate accounting—and then I worked part time in the same fields. I did everything from basic record-keeping to financial statements and corporate tax returns—living my working hours among numbers, a trusty heavy-duty calculator, and a collection of mechanical pencils. I visited clients locally but also traveled further afield to Jersey City and New York, carting heavy cases of client files (in the day before laptop computers). I met many different types of people, learning more about them than even they perhaps knew—for our priorities are often revealed in how we handle our money. The work was sometimes interesting, rarely exciting, and at times overwhelming (can we say ‘tax season’?). But rarely did I see my accounting work as God’s work.

As I grew deeper in my faith and began to look for God in all aspects of my life, I at first despaired over what I did for a living. After all, here I was, focusing all this time and energy on money—which Jesus seemed to spend so much time warning us about. Money has no intrinsic value of its own, it is an entirely human creation. Accounting then was just keeping track of this ‘artificial’ substance—where was the glory of God in that?

But then it slowly dawned on me—this was not about the numbers. It was about service—helping others with something that perhaps stressed them out, guiding them with accurate information to make decisions that could improve their businesses, and thus serve more persons; it was about education, communication, and making connections with others—building

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relationship. And through those relationships, I could perhaps not only be faithful to the job I was hired to do, but also be a faithful witness to Christ in the way I conducted myself on the job. God was present in accounting—because God was present in me.

Today we celebrate the feast of Pentecost—the day we remember the arrival of the gift of the Holy Spirit to those first apostles who were gathered together, waiting. We hear the story of the sound of rushing wind and the tongues ‘as of fire’ coming to rest on each one of them. The gift of languages was given, and out the apostles went, preaching the Good News and evangelizing a large number of persons in one day. And while the drama and energy of this event is indeed wonderful, it can sometimes be overwhelming. After all, we don’t often experience all that wind and fire when we are baptized—and oftentimes, there is no dramatic, instantaneous distribution of gifts in our lives when we pray. Does that mean we are less gifted? Are there only certain abilities that are considered ‘spiritual’—like healing, miracles, speaking in tongues? What if you are just an ordinary person, doing an ordinary job—does that mean the Spirit has no gift for you, that God is not glorified in your life? Not likely.

The apostles were given the gifts of language and courage because they needed those in order to do what they were called to do—evangelize at that moment of time. You see, Jews from all over were present in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost and they did speak many different languages. Trying to evangelize them all in Aramaic, Hebrew, or even Greek would have been frustrating and perhaps not very successful, no matter how powerfully or eloquently Peter and the others spoke. Thus, the Holy Spirit imparted the gift of languages, or more accurately,

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communication—so that the story may be told, the Good News shared, relationships formed.

The apostles were empowered, gifted, so that they do the work of the One who sent them—and that is just what they did.

The important thing to remember, however, is not the wind or fire or tongues or even the huge numbers that were baptized that day—it is the fact the apostles openly received the gifts given and then went out and used them to the glory of God. They did not stay huddled in their room; they did not compare gifts, they did not reject or fail to use the gifts given. They did not say, “oh thank you very much, but do you have the receipt?—because I really had something else in mind.” They trusted that the gifts they were given were the right ones, that God would use whatever effort they made and transform it into something greater. Because of that—the church was born and grew.

The Church is all of us—individually and together—called to serve God, to witness to Christ in our lives, to work for reconciliation and peace, and most of all, to make God’s great love known to the world. All of us—not just some of us. Each of us has been given gifts to share, and those gifts are not just those we may think of as being useful doing ‘church’ work. And that is a good thing, because, frankly, most of our lives are not spent within these walls—but lived out in schools, communities, workplaces. That is where the real work of the building the kingdom of God is done—out there, beyond the doors of this place. That is where our gifts need to be shared and used for the glory of God.

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But what kind of gifts? They can truly be almost anything--for God is both creative and abundant. Administration, teaching, sales, being encouraging, scientific skills, artistry—all these and many more can be shared to serve God. Our gifts and passions may even grow and evolve over time but nothing goes wasted in God's economy. For example, my experiences as an accountant and the things I learned—how to interact with a broad range of persons, learning the ins and outs of various businesses—all these things and more shaped me and taught me things I still use. Your story, your gifts, are most likely very different but no less valuable to God. But the point is that we use whatever gifts we have been given, in a way that honors God as we live out our baptismal promises.

The most crucial thing to remember is that it is not all about what you do—but also about who you are. Yes, we are called to lives of love and service—and very often that requires action on our part, exercising our gifts. But none of this would matter if we did not offer ourselves—our lives as gift—to God in the first place. Just as God first offers God's self to us, so we are invited to return that offer. The apostles on that Pentecost day stood open and willing, offering their lives and talents to God. Once empowered, they acted—but could not have done so if they did not have a relationship with God to begin with.

It is that relationship that is to ground all that we do or say—all that we are—in this world.

Whether you are out saving lives, or saving money; selling cars or preaching the word of God; taking out the trash or taking in the homeless—do so for the glory of God. Let the Spirit of God

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poured out upon you flow over and through you, spilling over to all those around you so they too may know the love of God.

Come, Holy Spirit, come—and let your fire burn in our hearts.

Amen.