

On January 12, 2010, A 7.0 earthquake devastated the Caribbean island of Haiti, leaving more than 200,000 people dead and 895,000 Haitians homeless. That week as the numbers of dead and homeless were just beginning to climb, I found it difficult to concentrate on the writing for the sermon, as my mind continued to go back to the news reports about Haiti.

The words 'for the common good' kept playing in my head. And the realization that 'for the common good' has to do something with how we each affect the world. I was amazed at the number of church groups that had teams already working in Haiti when it happened, who were now waiting for word of their mission teams after the devastation. These were people who were already there doing something to help this poor, hard hit part of the world even before it was once again devastated by another catastrophe.

Of course it wasn't only United Methodists. On Thursday, of that week, when I arrived home, my husband, Bob, shared that our Mennonite neighbors had just gotten back to the states from their work in Haiti, days before the quake hit. They had been at the Presidential Palace in Port-au-Prince, just days before.

How does it benefit a group of Mennonite workers to go to the Caribbean to build up people there? They do that because they understand the words 'for the common good.' Granted, a trip to the Caribbean during a Wisconsin winter isn't a bad idea, but it takes a lot of planning, finances and setting aside of self, to make that trip.

"For the common good.' What might that look like for you? First step is to hear the Apostle Paul saying to us: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed." Are you informed about your spiritual gifts? Paul continues to say: "Now there are varieties of gifts...; and there are varieties of services...; and there are varieties of activities..."

We all have things that we do that are our favorites, things that we are passionate about. Fill in the blank: I love to...my three favorite things to do are...You might want to write them down for further thought...Those desires and passions are given by God for us to use for the good of everyone.

There is painting... Painting walls and ceilings and houses may not be your idea of a great time, but if you are capable of doing it, it can be a blessing to you as you do it for another. Merle had never been on a mission trip. She had some health issues that made it challenging to go out of her personal environment. But when she heard that a group was going to New Orleans to help with hurricane recovery, she took a risk and signed up. The Merle that returned to Wisconsin was a different person than the one who left.

She shared a story of being given the opportunity to take the woman whose house they were restoring to the paint store to pick out colors for the restored rooms of her house. Merle said the woman was overjoyed with the opportunity and looked for a long time in wonder at all of the choices before her. What Merle learned on the trip was that painting at home, ended in satisfaction that a chore could be marked off of the 'to do' list, but sharing the same experience with and for another person was rewarding beyond any kind of work or chore. Merle certainly wouldn't have considered painting, a spiritual gift until she risked herself 'for the common good.'

For you it may be something other than painting. Who would consider cooking, gathering supplies or knitting as spiritual gifts? But each time these gifts are shared, they become a spiritual gift to those who receive, and even more so to those who give. Ask anyone who has helped with the meals around here, be they flipping pancakes, setting tables, cutting up vegetables and even doing dishes; they can tell you of the blessings of working together to serve others. Ask of those who deliver a Meal-on Wheels to someone who is lonely or deliver communion to the home of one who can't get here. They can tell you about the good news that they receive when they thought they were going to deliver that good news to someone else.

So first you need to know what you are willing to do and what you are willing to give. Remember the story of Mary and Martha with Jesus. Martha was frustrated that Mary wasn't helping serve the meal and she complained to Jesus. Jesus in turn, reminded Martha that Mary was also serving, but in a different way. He didn't tell Martha that being in the kitchen was wrong. We each have differing gifts. 'Variety is the spice of life!' But we are all needed in some way 'for the common good.'

Like Martha, we need to identify our own gifts, but like Christ we need to identify and affirm the gifts of others. Sometimes it is difficult for us to see the gifts God has equipped us for. But as others identify them for us, we say "Oh. Yeah, I guess I am pretty good at that." Be an identifier for others. In the United Methodist Guidelines for Pastors it says that the work of a pastor is to equip, empower and enable the people, caring for their spiritual needs. But you don't have to be a pastor to do that work. I invite you to think how you can equip, empower and enable the people around you to use the spiritual gifts they have been given. Following Jesus entails learning to affirm and utilize our own gifts and learning to affirm and utilize the gifts of others.

Not only do we all receive different gifts to share, but we exercise different gifts at different times of our lives. Through experiences of our lives we realize different gifts and differing ways to use our gifts. There are times when one of our gifts may be the ability to give substantially and there may be times in our lives when that is neither possible nor expected. Oddly enough though, those for whom giving may be the most difficult – the unemployed, the disabled, those on fixed incomes – nevertheless set a strong example for all of us by their earnest desire to give as they are able. Indeed they challenge others because they never feel they are doing enough.

There are many gifts. The challenge to all of us is to remember that the gifts of our money are only a part of our offering. There are gifts of prayers, actions, intentions, interventions, participation, and especially presence that inspire and strengthen the body of Christ. Regardless of what you can put into the offering plate, remember that our life of giving includes the waxing and waning of different gifts, but we always have something to give 'for the common good.'

The next step is to acknowledge the giver of the gifts. Paul says: "It is the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God who activates all of them in everyone." The gifts are given – and God waits for your response to activate them. Can you envision God on the throne, with Jesus at the right hand of God, and the Holy Spirit at some big switch-board. Jesus confirms to God that he has been working with you to prepare you for the right time and the right need for your gift. God then turns to the Holy Spirit and says "throw the switch."

Of course I am using human terms for something beyond our imagining, but if the gift is squelched or stifled or used against the common good, that is our choice. You know the 'freewill choice' that God trusts us with. Even so the gifts come from the Trinity: God, Jesus and the Spirit. We don't get to choose which ones we get. Yet we know they are to be used 'for the common good.' Unlike many of the 'gifts' we strive for in life – there is no activation fee. You don't even have to dial a 1-800 number to activate. The Spirit will let you know when it is time and a thought or prayer saying 'Ok, God, put me where you will.' It's like opening the gift package. Then remember that activation doesn't mean 'in use' or in good use.

In Verses 2 & 3, Paul remind us that at times we have all been led astray, not 'for the common good.' Paint in the wrong place isn't a gift... Does anyone know someone who is mean or selfish in the use of their gifts? Don't judge them, but identify and encourage them, making sure it isn't yourself... When we see God at work in others it is easier to see how God is at work in us. Is it too blunt for me to say to you "Life isn't just all about you, what you want and how you are affected?" If that is too blunt, then I won't say it again. But we are all in this together, and all, means all of us.

Find yourself and your place in the common good. Are you a round peg trying to fit in a square hole? Are you a puzzle piece in the wrong puzzle? God has given each of us diverse gifts and God has a place for each of us to use our gifts. There may be another puzzle that is missing your piece! Listen for where the Spirit might be leading you to use the gifts you have been given. Cultivate the gifts that may be lying dormant in you. We are only given so much time to use the gifts.

My mom enjoyed that we had a big house on the farm and in her 'appreciation' of that house she equipped, enabled and empowered each of us kids to keep it clean. Every week we helped wipe down, dust, vacuum and care for the entire large five bedroom farm house. She had a daily routine which included the upstairs on Thursday and the downstairs on Friday. Though I am not exactly sure how it came about, I am quite sure that it wasn't long in our learning process that she found that Dan was much better with the vacuum and I with the dust rag. So, I would dust all of the shelves and Dan would vacuum all of the furniture and floors.

I really disliked vacuuming, and if I had to do it, I would grumble under my breathe and probably didn't do a very good job. But each of the books and the knick-knacks on the shelf had love and meaning for me as I gently moved them each off or around the shelves week after week. I cared for them and it was my job – one of my gifts 'for the common good' of our family.

'Family' can be a word that describes the blood relationships you were born into. But when family comes together to identify for each other, encourage and share their gifts, they can then use their gifts for the common good. Family when they work together, each doing their job or part, become a new gift - A shared blessing.

The church can be a family, a place where a diversity of gifts are discovered and honored. None of us has been given all the gifts we need to fulfill the mission of Christ on our own. Therefore Christ gives us sisters and brothers in the church, the "body of Christ," whose gifts compliment ours. You may have thought that you come to church to get something. You do! And you receive even more as you begin to be a part of the giving.

Earlier I invited you to fill in the blank: I love to...my three favorite things to do are...take time to process your spiritual gifts. How are the things that you do, Spiritual Gifts? Why has God given you the ability to do them? How well are you using them as Spiritual gifts?

In the hymn 'Forward, Through the Ages' it states: "In each loss or triumph, lose or triumph all." (*repeat*) Verse 7 of I Corinthians 12 says: "To each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." I invite you to let these words play in your head this week: 'for the common good.' What does that mean for you and what are you doing with it?