

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 16, 2022 (2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

A friend of mine once sent me this description of "The Perfect Pastor". Maybe you've heard it before.

"The Perfect Pastor" is 26 years old and he has been preaching for 30 years. He is tall and short, thin and heavysset, handsome and homely. He has one brown eye and one blue eye. His hair is parted in the middle, with the left side dark and straight and the right side blonde and wavy, with a gray streak down the middle to show wisdom and maturity.

The perfect pastor has a burning desire to work with teenagers and spends all his time with older folks. He smiles all the time with a straight face, because he has a sense of humor that keeps him seriously dedicated to his work. He is busy from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. in every type of task from preaching to janitorial work, and he spends plenty of time with his family so he can be a good husband and father. He makes thirty calls each day on church members, spends all his time evangelizing the un-churched, and is always in his office if and when needed.

Obviously, there's NO SUCH THING as the "perfect pastor."

Many years ago there was a letter in the Dear Abby column in the newspaper. This is how it read:

Dear Abby: One of the toughest tasks a church faces is choosing a good minister. A member of an official board undergoing this painful process finally lost patience. He'd watched the pastoral relations committee reject applicant after applicant for some fault, alleged or otherwise. It was time for a bit of soul-searching on the part of the committee. So he stood up and read a letter purporting to be from another applicant.

"Gentlemen: Understanding your pulpit is vacant, I should like to apply for the position. I have many qualifications. I've been a preacher with much success and also have had some success as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer. I've been a leader most places I've been.

"I'm over 50 years of age. I have never preached in one place for more than three years. In some places, I have left town after my work caused riots and disturbances. I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing.

"My health is not too good, though I still get a great deal done.

"I've not gotten along well with religious leaders in towns where I have preached. I am not too good at keeping records. I have been known to forget whom I baptized.

"However, if you can use me, I shall do my best for you."

The board member looked over the committee. "Well, what do you think? Shall we call him?"

The good church folks were aghast. Call an unhealthy, trouble-making, absentminded ex-jailbird? Was the board member crazy? Who signed the application? Who has such colossal nerve?

The board member eyed them all keenly before he answered.

(Do you know who it was?)

"It's signed, 'the Apostle Paul.'"

Again, if EVEN ST. PAUL HIMSELF doesn't measure up, there's NO SUCH THING as the "perfect pastor."

One of the things that we can learn from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is that everybody has DIFFERENT gifts, but NO ONE can have them ALL. As much as we'd like to be PERFECT, it's JUST NOT POSSIBLE.

I remember a country song from the 80's by a singer named Mac Davis. It was about a guy who thought he WAS perfect. Maybe you remember it too. (You can sing along if you do.) The chorus went like this:

"Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble, when you're perfect in every way.
I can't wait to look in the mirror—I get better lookin' each day.
To know me is to love me—I must be a (ahem, heck) of a man.
Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble, but I'm doin' the best that I can."

I bet you never thought we'd sing THAT song in church. It shows just how RIDICULOUS the idea of PERFECTION is. NOBODY'S perfect. Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote that he was "all things to all people," but even St. Paul, MODEST as he WAS, was NOT PERFECT. We all have DIFFERENT gifts, and NO ONE PERSON can have EVERY spiritual gift.

Now, believe it or not, there's actually some BEAUTY in that. I see it every time I gather with our area Lutheran pastors each week, or with OTHER pastors at a Conference meeting, or at a Synod event. As I talk with the other pastors, I see, in EACH of them, God's gifts for ministry, but they are VERY DIFFERENT gifts for each one – a VARIETY of God's spiritual gifts, but the SAME Spirit calling them to ministry.

What I'm saying is this: we ALL have different gifts, but God USES them for a COMMON purpose. And the truth of that really hit me this week, as the individual reports for the ANNUAL report started coming in. As you read about the ministries of this congregation, you can SEE God working here. It's BEAUTIFUL how God takes the INDIVIDUAL gifts of our members and pulls them together in such a way that it makes a CHURCH. As Paul wrote, "To EACH is given the manifestation of the Spirit—for the COMMON good."

In THIS congregation, there ARE varieties of gifts and services and activities: There are the gifts of our Sunday school teachers; the gifts of our Affirmation teachers, guides and mentors and our youth too; the gifts of our Kitchen workers and the Quilters and Prayer Shawl makers, and Days for Girls kit makers; the gifts of the Property Committee; the gifts of our Altar Guild; the gifts of our musicians, of our staff, our church council, our readers and ushers; the gifts of our Parish Nurses and Home Communion visitors; and SO many more. So many GIFTS, VARIETIES of gifts, that TOGETHER MAKE First Lutheran church.

We NEED those varieties, because ONE person can't DO ALL those things. A church is a gathering of DIFFERENT people, bound together by God to make a COMMUNITY of believers – the same Spirit, the same purpose, and the same mission. God has given EACH of you spiritual gifts for the common good. This is a gifted congregation. Don't be afraid to SHARE your gifts.

But when ASKED to SHARE your gifts, I've heard many of you say, "I'm not spiritual enough," or "I'm not religious enough." Well, of COURSE you are. God has given SOME spiritual gift to each and EVERY one of us.

I always keep this nearby in my office. These are selections from Nelson Mandela's inaugural address in 1994. He said,

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves: Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you NOT to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small doesn't serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people feel secure around you.

We are born to make manifest the *glory of God* that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in *everyone*.

And these words are especially appropriate this Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

Those are powerful words.

So I ask you, what's your spiritual gift? The Bible says, "To each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." So, it's not a question of WHETHER you are gifted; you ARE gifted. You have SO MUCH to give. The ONLY question is HOW you will use the gifts you HAVE. Will you keep them to yourself, or will you USE them to build up the body of Christ?

What's YOUR gift? More importantly, what does God want you to DO with it? Amen.