

Lest we think we are self-made people, we need only read the 12th chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul had known this community of believers for three years. He had arrived in Corinth in the year 50 AD only 20 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Paul preached with power and taught with authority and many Gentiles came to believe. Paul was their father in their faith.

Paul stayed with them in Corinth for a year and a half nurturing the church. Then Paul crossed the Aegean to Ephesus but he continued to care for the Corinthians through his letters to them.¹ But we do have Paul's letters in First Corinthians that are structured around the concerns and problems the people had in living out their faith.

The city of Corinth was some 40 miles south-southwest of Athens and was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia strategically located on a narrow isthmus perfect for commerce. Corinth had a reputation for wealth without culture and for abusing the poor. The congregation of the church in Corinth was a microcosm of the Greco-Roman world and was not so unlike ours. There were a few wealthy people who sat at the top of the social pyramid, but most were poor, and there was no middle class at all.² Most Corinthians were Gentiles. Paul was called to evangelize the Gentiles.³

I often wish that we had the questions that Paul was responding to when he wrote his letters. In First Corinthians the issues are well defined. And Paul responded to his children encouraging them to live into their faith more fully and with their whole hearts and to change their behavior and thinking about certain matters. After Paul had moved on to Ephesus they must have written to him asking for advise as they might have asked a loving father about their problems with one another. In the 12th chapter Paul responded to claims of special status by some of the Corinthians who understood themselves to have received certain special spiritual gifts. He made it abundantly clear that true spiritual gifts

come from the Holy Spirit and the test of a true gift is whether it is used for the common good of the community.

When pursuing our own callings, we have to consider our gifts. And those gifts are of the Holy Spirit. Just as our calls come from God, so our gifts come directly from God. We receive certain gifts and a certain amount or our own portion of gifts so that we can live into the callings. God loves us and wants us to give back that love, and God has given us all that we need. Our gifts of the Spirit allow us to live into the callings to serve God in community. Just as God knows all our gifts, God also knows our faults.

If we don't think we have faults, all we need to do is ask our best friend. (We can trust your best friend to tell you with love about your shortcomings.) But we also should ask our best friend – the person closest to us in our community – about what our gifts are. We could ask someone who can hold up the mirror for us – hold it up with love.

In the US part of the training for priests is Clinical Pastoral Education – CPE. 15 years ago when I did my CPE as a test of my call. I was blessed to be surrounded by good friends who loved me. My supervisor was one of those people. It was a time of discernment for me, discernment in community. In a particularly honest conversation with my supervisor, he asked what I thought about the mark on my forehead. He was holding up the mirror for me. I thought the cross from my baptism showed, the cross where I was sealed as Christ's own forever. He said there was another sign – a 'P' for prophet. Now other good friends had been honest with me, calling me a torch-bearer, but a prophet...no. No, visionary, sometimes perhaps, perceptive priest, maybe, creative thinker, absolutely, yes. But prophet, no! I don't hear God speaking to me. Except in prayer.

The prophets I know were from the Old Testament. God spoke to and through them. Isaiah was the prophet I knew best. The people of Israel returned to Jerusalem after their exile in Babylonia to their land that was desolate and in need of recreation. They believed that God had ceased to care for them. So God spoke to them through the prophet Isaiah saying I delight in you; I love you with a very great love, and I will marry you and rejoice

in you. God sent the prophet to give encouragement to those who had been exiled and oppressed with this message of love.

Likewise Paul wrote to the new Christians in Corinth to give them encouragement, but more than that. He wrote to address specific problems the community was experiencing. What were Paul's gifts. His calling surely was to plant the church. And as a church planter – a founding father figure – he relied upon his great knowledge of Scripture. Paul was a gifted theologian very well versed in the Word. Yes, Paul wrote with irony and often with sarcasm. (Tact was not his gift.) But his message was perfectly clear. He defined gifts rather widely and his list of gifts in this portion of the 12th chapter of First Corinthians was not exhaustive, but he made clear that spiritual gifts are from God and must be tested. The Spirit herself is a gift of the Father; Christ Jesus was sent to use his God-given gifts to serve, to minister; then God the Father is the source of all. Just as Christ's gifts were to serve, so all gifts are not for our own personal use, but for the common good.

Paul mentioned but a few of the gifts of God in response to the needs of the Corinthians. "Wisdom" and "knowledge" are for instruction; "faith" here meant exceptionally deep faith – that God can do anything. "Discernment" was about the ability to tell whether gifts genuinely come from God. "Tongues" could be interpreted to be unintelligible speech which needs "interpretation". Each of us receives a gift (perhaps not one listed); God chooses, not us. And so God chose Paul to use his knowledge of theology and scripture to instruct and bring people to faith.

But what of Mary? Yes, God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus; through Mary Jesus became one of us – became fully human. And because of Mary, Jesus's first miracle took place at Cana of Galilee. At her insistence Jesus turned water into wine. In John's Gospel Mary appears only in two scenes, at the wedding feast in Cana at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry and at the foot of the cross where his ministry as one of us – as a human – came to an end. So what were Mary's gifts? Mary was both a herald and a witness of Jesus's calling. She was there to prompt him to perform his first miracle to

begin his ministry. And she was called to be there as he died for us – as humanity left him.

It is not often that all three readings in the lectionary come together as they do today. Isaiah prophesied that God loves us like a bridegroom loves his bride. Just so, we could see in the miracle at Cana the fulfillment of God's promise to us all. Indeed God's great wedding feast with us began at Cana. Would that we had a Paul to write to when we have problems living into our faith, into our callings.

May we rely on Old Testament prophets, and Paul's letters to people very like us, and the Gospels to keep us in the faith. And may we together work to discern our gifts so that we may fully embrace our callings to live fully in faith our time in our world.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ Scholars believe that he had written to them before, but those letters are lost to us.

² Most Corinthian believers were not the wisest, not the most powerful, not of noble birth, but some were. One of the wealthiest held house meetings for the whole church. Other believers hosted the church assemblies for the Lord's Supper.

³ This does not rule out the presence of some Jews. Never-the-less, this Jewish apostle was able to make his monotheistic God theirs. They became familiar with Israel's Scriptures. There were never issues of antagonism between these Corinthian Gentiles and the Jews.