

GIFTED...For Love
1 Corinthians 13:1-3

This August, we've been talking about God's design for *the church*—how this thing we're all a part of is supposed to *work*. To begin, Jenn Surtees explained that the work of the church is more than just the contribution of a few paid professionals—*products and services provided by church staff, to be paid for and consumed by the rest of us*. Church work is the work of *all of us*; the shared investment of all God's *saints, clergy, priests, and ministers*—words that, in the Bible, refer to *all of us*. Next, Jeff Martens revealed that, to equip us for this work, God has given us all *spiritual gifts*—special talents and abilities we all have, to be used to build the church. Then Carrie Jones gave us a crash course on the diverse range of gifts and how they're designed to work together. (*if you haven't yet done the spiritual gifts assessment we provided, you can find it on our website or get a copy at the Welcome Centre*) Then last week, Jeff Lockyer clarified that God hasn't gifted us for our *own* fulfillment, but for the sake and benefit of *others*, and *the Body as a whole*. This is God's design for how church *works*: a *body* of individual *parts*, each uniquely gifted to contribute in a unified, others-oriented way to continue the mission and work of Jesus.

Now for a moment, imagine with me a church fully living out that vision: a community committed to not just *going* church, but actually *being* the church, not just *consumers* of its ministry, but vital *contributors* to its mission, investing the best of ourselves—*our time, talent and treasure; the full weight of our diverse experience, expertise, passion and perspective*—to fully embody the presence of Christ in the world; every Spirit-enabled gift firing on all cylinders.

Imagine a church where skilled *teachers* open our minds to new ideas. Where *leaders* help the rest of us realize our full potential. Prophetic disrupters speaking truth to power, and those with wisdom and discernment gifts giving wise counsel. Those with the uncanny ability to

share Jesus in a winsome way draw in new believers. *Artists* crafting beautiful songs, sculptures, paintings, and poetry. Hospitality experts creating warm and welcoming spaces for connection. Those with *mercy* gifts, comforting the sick and suffering. Gifted *healers* curing illnesses; gifted *helpers* coming alongside others. Skilled *administrators* helping us organize and manage people and tasks effectively and efficiently. Business and financial wizards helping maximize our meager budgets. Those with hands-on skills: tech-geeks, neat-freaks, roofers, and repair-workers care-taking our infrastructure. Those with extraordinary faith, moving mountains with their prayers. People who always seem to have just the right words encouraging those who are struggling.

Imagine a church where all the gifts operate at full capacity. Imagine the church being *the* place in Niagara where people come to discover what makes them *special*—*their God-given gifts*—and learn how *their* gift is part of a larger *network* of gifts that all contribute to making the world a better place for everyone. Imagine becoming a church like *that*. And then imagine, at the end of our lives, standing before Jesus, ready to hear the life-affirming words, “*Well done, good and faithful servants,*” only to discover that all our activity, all our work, all our effort was all for *nothing*—that a church like *that* could be seen by God as *worthless*—*noise* and *nonsense*. Because, as we wrap up this conversation about *spiritual gifts* and how the church *works*, that’s exactly the imaginative journey the Apostle Paul describes in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Now, as with all scripture, while Paul’s letters were divinely inspired and written *for* us, they weren’t written directly *to* us. To hear God’s message *to us* through them, we *first* need to try to appreciate how they were intended for their original audience—*the church in Corinth*. The Corinthians were a new and exciting, wealthy, influential, charismatic, and *highly gifted* church, planted by Paul just a few years earlier. (*You can read that story in the Book of Acts*) Since then, Paul had received reports that, despite how insanely gifted the Corinthians were, something

was amiss, at least partly because of *how* they were using their *spiritual gifts*. Before addressing these concerns, Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians who they were *before* meeting Jesus.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth (1:26)

In other words, they were people of *underwhelming* stock. But encountering Jesus had turned them into *super-charged humans*, endowed and energized with new *skills* and *abilities*.

For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—you do not lack any spiritual gift. (1 Corinthians 1:4-7)

Enriched in *every way*; not lacking in *any* gift. A rags-to-riches story, the Corinthians had gone from *societal zeroes* to *spiritual heroes*; from chronically *underwhelming* to consistently *outperforming* all other churches. The Corinthians had the most *charismatic* leaders, the most *eloquent* teachers, the most *influential* pastors, the most *inspiring* worship leaders, the most *gifted kids*’ and youth workers, the most *effective* outreach strategies, with interest-groups for people of all ages and stages. They had the *slickest* website, the *friendliest* greeters, the *cleanest* bathrooms, the *best* coffee... Corinth was the *it*-church; the one-stop shop for all your church needs—with top-shelf programs and can’t-miss events. So gifted, in fact, it became a kind of competition to see who was the *most* extraordinarily gifted; gatherings devolving into episodes of *Corinth’s Got Talent*, each member trying to outdo the rest. And rather than pouring cold water on their enthusiasm for excelling in the gifts, Paul concludes chapter 12 by encouraging them to **“Eagerly desire the greater gifts...” (1 Cor 12:31a)**—the very gifts that had transformed them from perpetual *losers* into prominent *leaders*, after all. But then, appealing to their desire to be a truly *great* church, Paul leans in tantalizingly, *as if whispering a great secret*, writing:

“...and yet I will show you the most excellent way.” (1 Cor 12:31b)

You can just imagine their anticipation as they turned the page from chapter 12 to 13.

In words made famous by weddings everywhere, Paul reveals his *most excellent way*:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, *but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal*. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, *but do not have love, I am nothing*. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, *but do not have love, I gain nothing*. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

You can feel the gut-punch. Imagine, being so gifted as to speak with angels, understand *all* mysteries and *all* knowledge, with faith to alter reality with your prayers, with generosity to empty your savings account to fill the pockets of the poor, willing to suffer physical harm—even *death*—for the cause of Christ, and it all amounts to *nothing*. To maybe the most gifted church ever assembled, Paul reveals that without *love*, everything we *have*, *are*, and *do* is *worthless*—meaningless *noise* and *nonsense*. Friends, this isn't a *wedding* verse; it's a *wake-up call*!

Having spent my entire adult life doing church-work *professionally*, a verse like this calls for sober reflection. When I was younger, a big part of my faith development was the result of being invited to be a contributor to the work of the church. As I began to discover, develop, and deploy my spiritual gifts, I felt a real sense of *purpose*—I had a role to play. And I was convinced that if *everyone* could find *their* fit, we'd *all* share that same sense of purpose. So, I devoted my energy to helping people discover, develop, and deploy *their* gifts. Soon, we became a lot like the church we imagined together earlier—a beehive of ministry activity, with hundreds of gifted individuals activated in a myriad of diverse ways. Whatever your *gift*, we provided the *gig*; If you had a passion, we'd build a program for it. Engagement rates were off the charts, meaning that most people were showing up not just *spectate* but to *serve*. Our anchor causes awakened the untapped potential of activist-types—those with gifts of *mercy* and *helps*. Life Groups unleashed those with *pastoral* and *hospitality* gifts. *Artists*, *teachers*, and *evangelists* transformed weekend services into a dynamic kaleidoscope of worship and creativity. And as a parade of people joined

the movement, we had to hire police to manage traffic-flow in and out of our parking lot. But as I drove off that parking lot many Sundays, I'd wonder to myself if, despite our apparent success, *anything of eternal value was really happening?* And it wasn't just *me*. Many of our leaders were asking similar questions, wondering if we were really even being a church *at all*. Were all our songs and sermons just noise? *Resounding gongs and clanging cymbals*. For all our *work and creativity*, all our passionate *worship*, generous *giving*, and mountain-moving *faith*—had God's kingdom gained an inch, or was it all pointless, worthless, and empty? We'd envisioned, empowered, and engaged people in all kinds of *church work*, but had we lost sight of what the work of the church really was? Jesus had been crystal clear with his original disciples:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
John 13:34-35

The true *purpose* of the church—of being *disciples*—is to follow Jesus into a life of *love*. To be formed *by love, into love, for the sake of love*, loving *ourselves, our neighbours, strangers*, and even our *enemies*. Christ's one command is to love *God* by loving *others*. Eugene Peterson wrote, "*Love is not what we do after we get the other things done, if we have any energy left over. Love is what we do, period. It is not how we work; it is our work.*" Paul put it this way: "***The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.***" (Gal 5:6) Love *is* the work of the church—it's what we do; it's the only thing that counts, *period*. Everything else is *meaningless*.

1 Corinthians 13 makes this impossible to ignore. The point of discovering, developing, and deploying our spiritual gifts is to enable us to better embody *love* together. We will never achieve our God-given purpose through realizing the full potential of our gifts *alone*; purpose, meaning, and fulfillment can only be found in leveraging our gifts to realize the full potential of *love*. Only *love* connects our lives us to something *eternal*; *spiritual gifts*, on the other hand, are

only *temporary*. Paul writes, “***where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away,***” reminding us that only, “***Love never ends.***” (1 Cor 13:8) According to Paul, even *faith* and *hope* will one day fade away until all that remains is *love*—the greatest of all gifts; the most excellent way.

When a church like ours employs everyone’s gifts in the work of *love*, we become a place where leadership isn’t about exerting *power*; it’s leveraging influence to inspire *love*. Teaching isn’t just a bunch of *talk*; it’s *training* us in the way of *love*. Wisdom and Discernment isn’t about being the smartest person in the room; it’s navigating what *love* looks like in tricky situations. A place where an artist’s true *craft* is finding creative ways to show *kindness*, and *generosity* fuels the work of *justice*. Evangelism is more about *compassion*, than *conversion*. Prophetic language flows from patiently listening, and Mercy gifts fuel *activism* that isn’t *easily angered*. Hospitality isn’t just showing people where to sit; it’s helping them find where they belong. Administration isn’t *crossing Ts* and *dotting Is*; it’s creating structures that organize *chaos* into *care*. Where we *serve* without *self-interest* and *encourage* without *envy*. This is what it means to *eagerly desire the greater gifts*; this is *the most excellent way*—spiritual gifts under the influence of *love*. The Corinthians knew what it was to be *nothing*—to be a *nobody* from *nowhere*. They thought their *giftedness* was the key to *greatness*, not realizing that without love, they were squandering their gifts, turning them back into *nothing*. See, spiritual gifts alone can’t make a church great. To paraphrase Mother Teresa, *there are no great churches, only simple churches with great love*.

This is God’s design for the church—a community of gifted people *filled* with love, *fueled* by love, and ultimately being *formed* into love. As Paul summarizes in Ephesians 4:16:

God makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

That's what this conversation about *spiritual gifts* and *how the church works* has been all about—not *volunteer recruitment*, or trying to get more *church work* done, or how to be the *greatest* or most *gifted* church in town, but to invite all of us to contribute to the *real* work of the church, the work of *love*—a body built *by* love, being built *into* love, all *because* of love.

So, as we wrap up this month-long series, allow me to take you on *another* imaginative journey... to imagine a *church* where all the gifts of the Spirit come together and enable us as a community to embody Christ's love to each other, and to the world around us.

Imagine a church where a retired truck-driver like Gary, uses his *driving* skills to bring cancer patients to their medical appointments, to show Christ's love. Imagine a church where people like Paula, after raising her own kids, puts her *parenting* skills to work in her housing complex, becoming a surrogate mom to the neighbourhood kids, to make sure they know the love of Jesus. A church where people like Kathy show up on Friday nights with her gift of *helps* to wash dishes, as we serve Christ's love on a plate of food at Harvest Kitchen. A church where people like David, who uses his hospitality gifts to serve as a greeter, meets someone like Linda, who uses her gift of encouragement to support him through his cancer journey, inspiring David to show up (un-asked) to be a host at the funeral of Linda's son—loving shared back and forth. Imagine a church where people like Doug open their woodshop to a guy like Dennis, who uses his crafting skills to make presents for under-privileged kids at Christmas, so they'll feel Christ's love. A church where former pastors and teachers like *Ian* and *Rena* come out of retirement for an *It Takes Our Village* series, to use their *teaching* gifts to help us understand the Father's love. A church where students like Tessa, Emma, Paytin and Kaylin use the gift of a summer break to help run our Activate day-camp, showing God's love to kids. Where someone like Katie uses her shepherd-gift to care for the spiritual health of a student small group. Where a Danielle can use

her *mercy* gift to launch a pantry-partner program to make sure there's no need among us, and people like Neil use words and emails to regularly encourage volunteers. A church where small groups in Vineland show *hospitality* to migrant farmworkers, as God's love turns foreigners into family; where trained nurses and doctors use the gift of *healing* to provide free quality health-care to migrant workers, while Alison uses her admin skills to keep the clinic running smoothly. Imagine a church where home builders and political activists leverage their connections and know-how to secure funding for an affordable housing project, while trained psychotherapists and front-line workers serve and support those facing homelessness and mental health crises. Where trained-chefs and home-cooks prepare delicious, healthy meals for those experiencing food-insecurity. Where people pick up extra work-shifts to giving more generously, so we can show Christ's love more generously. Where green thumbs help feed the hungry and beautify the world, one vegetable garden and flower bed at a time. Imagine a church where all our gifts work together to incarnate Christ's love. And the best part of imagining a church like *this* is that it's *not* imaginary—it's real, happening all around us, as ordinary people like you and me are being transformed by love, into love, for the sake of love, all because of love.

Friends, this church is a *gift*—God's gift to us *all*. And it's full of highly gifted individuals who have so much to give. But the greatest gift we've been given is the gift of God's incarnate love in Jesus. If we'll let Christ's love flow through our God-given, Holy-Spirit-energized talents and abilities, we can become an unstoppable force of incarnational love in our community. We can be the vehicle through which God's greatest gift of love can be given to the world around us. That's the kind of church God dreams of; the kind of church Jesus hung a cross for; the kind of church the Spirit has gifted us to become. The kind of church we so eagerly desire to be. There may be no *great* churches, but may we increasingly be a church of great *love*. Let's pray.