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The 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany

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St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church

“Discernment is faithful living and listening to God’s love and direction so that we can fulfill our individual calling and shared mission.” – Henri Nouwen

I look around this sanctuary and I see a community filled with gifts of the Spirit. There are voices raised in verse and song; hands opened to offer the sacraments & light the candles, to open our doors in welcome and to greet our guests; to prepare food, bag beans, to weed the garden or to knit a prayer shawl; some of us organize while others offer unseen support. Some offer wisdom and counsel, while others apply that wisdom.

It is because of the many gifts of the Spirit present here that St. Dunstan’s is a vital and vibrant community of faith. And yet, I suspect there are hidden gifts within our community of which we are not yet aware, for each one of us has gifts that if shared, would further enhance and strengthen who we are and how we love and the way we serve one another and our greater community. Gifts that would make known God’s goodness, Jesus’ love.

In his letter to the Corinthian’s, Paul writes to reassure them, to help them identify the spiritual gifts present in their community – gifts as unique and varied as they are. Although committed to a common life and ministry in Christ, their community, like all human groups, has its share of conflict and struggles. There are disagreements and misunderstandings, imbalances of power. Sometimes the cause of the individual seems to overtake the cause of the whole. Paul is there to help them grow in their faith and to learn how to share a communal life, one that invites and allows each person to share and use their unique spiritual gifts. He realizes that they have no frame of reference for what a spiritual gift is, nor the experience of how to help one another discern and use their gifts.

We face the same challenge in the church today: It is the call to live a communal life in Christ, while ensuring every member the opportunity to participate, to contribute. But how are we to offer our gifts, if we don’t know what they are? A churchy word that is used a lot in the Episcopal church, and perhaps in churches in general, is the word discernment. But what does it mean?

In his book, *Discernment*, theologian, writer, catholic priest and servant of many, Henri Nouwen notes that Christian discernment is not the same thing as decision making. Making a decision can be a rational and straight forward act, one that often relies upon our own wisdom, and calls us to set goals as we consider our options. We may find ourselves making a list of pros and cons for each choice, and then choosing the action that meets our goal most effectively.

Discernment is different. Nouwen calls it a spiritual discipline or practice if you will. It is an invitation to seek, pray, to wonder and to open ourselves up to God’s direction for our lives. Discernment is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God’s desire. When we practice discernment, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people, and to identify which ones lead us further away; we seek to know if we are acting out of our own desire, or out of God’s desire for us.

A unique quality of discernment is that it is both an individual and a communal practice. Individually, our discerning may begin with a question, a wondering. We may long for something more, or sense God nudging us into a new, unknown place. We may feel restless, or spiritually hungry. And so we turn to God, praying for wisdom and insight, listening for God’s voice. But sometimes, we can’t see and we can’t hear. Sometimes we need the help of others.

Years ago, I participated in a course of theological education from Sewanee, The University of the South, called Education for Ministry or EfM. It was a four-year course of study, September to June that did a deep dive into the Old and New Testaments, Church History, and in the final year, the discernment of one's spiritual gifts and how one might use them in ministry. Although as individual students charged with studying the content, every class meeting included time for group Theological Reflection – a time when we were invited to consider a real-life situation and then to examine it through a variety of theological lenses. From participating in this exercise, I honed my skills of observation and acute listening. As the group considered the situation, we were invited to first consider our own viewpoint, then invited to look through the lens of others. What we found was that in the space of sharing, wondering, and listening to one another, with encouragement, that we were better able to hear God's voice speaking. At the end of the course, I had more insight into what my gifts were and were not, and I was then able to begin imagining how God might call me to use them.

Sometimes, it is in the company of community that we best discern. We may have an inkling about our spiritual gifts, and yet, not feel ready to explore them until someone else recognizes and names them for us. Our gifts can be obvious to others, and sometimes we just need an invitation or even a push to put them to use.

In our Gospel, we find Jesus, his disciples and his mother at a wedding in Cana. In a moment when the wine has run out, it is Jesus' mother who suggests that he do something about it, although she doesn't say what. Even as he pushes back, even as he suggests that he isn't ready, rather than defend or try to coerce him, his mother simply directs the servants to do as he tells them. With her words and her unspoken confidence in him, she creates a space in which her son may begin reveal himself, to begin to use his gifts. And he does. And like the water which filled the jars and became an abundance of wine, it is Jesus who fills us to the brim, so that all that is within us may be transformed into abundant gifts we cannot even imagine, gifts when acknowledged and nurtured by others, may make all the difference.

The gifts of the spirit are many, as unique and diverse as we are. Every member of the church, each one of us, has something given us by God to share. Look around you. What are the gifts present in this space? Some we can see easily, while others may be more subtle. As we talk about them with one another, and take time to wonder, explore, and discern them together, we become aware of the gifts of our community. Then, we can begin to imagine ways to help one another to use them. Sometimes this means creating new ministry opportunities; sometimes it means stepping aside so someone else can step in and use their gifts.

Paul set out into Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia – using his gifts of proclamation, preaching & teaching to share the Gospel and to establish new communities of believers – the church. Although a primary leader, Paul understood that for the church to prosper, he would need to raise up others in leadership, to help them identify and hone their gifts for the good of the community. He understood 21st century succession planning, the importance of formation and seeding new leaders, of stepping out when it was time to let them lead the way. For Paul, leadership was to be nurtured and shared. Although our gifts are individual in nature, God calls us to use them for the benefit of the whole community.

The world needs your gifts. St. Dunstan's needs your gifts. Some of you may be uncertain of your gifts. You may wonder if there is a place here for your gifts to be used. Yes, there is. There is room for them all, there is ministry to share. Bishop Lucinda in her address to the Diocesan Convention called us to Become New Church. It is an invitation that demands that we discern together who we are, that we identify our gifts, and that we listen and look for how God is calling us to use them in new and different ways, both within the church walls and out in the world. It is the invitation to name, celebrate and use our gifts to God's glory. Amen.