

**TO EACH IS GIVEN:  
GIVING UP GIVING UP THINGS FOR LENT**

**1 Corinthians 12: 1-11**

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I think I understand how the apostle Paul felt as he prepared to write the 12th chapter of his letter to the church in Corinth. He felt a lot like Ned Nederlander. You may not know who Ned Nederlander is unless your guilty pleasure happens to be cheesy slapstick comedy movies. Ned, played by Martin Short, is one of the Three Amigos in the movie aptly titled "The Three Amigos." The other two are Dusty Bottoms (played by Chevy Chase) and Lucky Day (played by Steve Martin). They are three unemployed silent movie actors who take what they think is a job offer to film a movie on location with El Guapo, supposedly the most famous actor in all of Mexico. Instead they find themselves roped into a real-life conflict between El Guapo, who actually heads up a gang of outlaws, and the quaint town of Santa Poco, the soon-to-be victim of his next pillaging.

Near the end of the movie, with the standoff imminent, the Three Amigos find themselves in the awkward position of rallying the people of Santa Poco to the cause. Lucky Day launches into his inspirational speech: *In a way, each of us has an El Guapo to face, he declares. For some, shyness might be their El Guapo. For others, a fear of failure might be their El Guapo. For us, El Guapo is a big, dangerous man who wants to kill us. But as sure as my name is Lucky Day, the people of Santa Poco can conquer their own personal El Guapo, who also happens to be "the actual" El Guapo!*<sup>1</sup>

The thing is, they don't know how to conquer "the actual El Guapo." They are a peaceful town of peaceful people. What can they do? And that's when Ned Nederlander reminds the town that everybody has gifts they can use to defeat the enemy. And so he asks them, *What is it that this town really does well?* After a period of silence one elderly lady proclaims: *We can sew!* Now I'm not going to tell you how the Three Amigos and the residents of Santa Poco use sewing to vanquish El Guapo and his gang of outlaws. I'll let you check it out for yourself, assuming you're inclined, as I am, to corny comedies from the 80s.

But back to my point and Ned Nederlander's Paul-like moment. *This is not a town of weaklings*, Ned declares. Ned saw something in those people that they didn't see in themselves. Which is pretty much the same situation Paul faced as he composed his letter to the Corinthians. Except it wasn't an outside enemy they face, but internal. Apparently there were those in the church who viewed their gifts – their skills and abilities – as status symbols, assuming they ranked a little higher than others on the church totem pole. Others in the church made great show of their gifts, like they'd just made the finals of *American Idol*. And there were also those who simply assumed they didn't have any gifts, or that the time for those gifts had long passed. The result of all of this was a church where "gifts" had become anything but; a source of division instead of the uplifting of the body of Christ they were intended to be.

Stuff like this drove Paul nuts. You can sense it in some of his other writings, when he sarcastically refers to himself as "a fool for Christ," or when he begins a new paragraph by greeting his audience with the contemporary equivalent of "You idiots!" The notion that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092086/quotes>, visited on 2.15.2010.

there was any hierarchy in the church at all, official or implied, grated on Paul's nerves. Why is it, he wondered, that the very things that are supposed to unify and build up the church wind up being the very things that tear it down?

It's not a bad question, of course – for Paul's time and for ours. Which is why Paul reaches into his rhetorical arsenal and conjures up something to persuade the masses, as he does so eloquently and forcefully in verse 4 and following:

*Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;  
and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;  
and there are varieties of activities,  
but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.  
To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

You noticed, I'm sure, the repetition of the word "same." I doubt that's by mistake. It seems pretty obvious the point that Paul makes here: that all of these gifts, though diverse, come from the same source, the same God. That God is One, as the people who serve God should be.

But there's another implication that rises out of Paul's words; one that tends to get lost in the shuffle. Did you notice it, at the end? *To Each Is Given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To each is given....* You may have noticed that was part of the sermon title for this Sunday. In fact, it's the theme for our entire sermon series this Lent. Because if there is one thing Paul wanted to make as clear as possible to those Corinthians, and to us, it is this: it is not a question of whether someone *has* gifts. It's not a question as to whether there are gifts that exist within us. *To each is given!*

Now I want to be very clear here, too. Every one of us has something we can give to this church. Every one. Certainly part of the challenge is figuring out what those gifts are – and we'll be doing some of that in the rest of the sermons this Lenten season. But before we can do that, we've got to acknowledge the bold assertion Paul makes: *To each is given.* Say it with me: **To Each Is Given!** We've got to embrace this because, as Paul learned from his beloved Corinthian church, the faith community has made a habit over the years of not always accepting it.

And don't get me wrong; there are plenty of folks who give lots of their time and energy to carrying out the mission of the church, and we thank God for them. But you know what I'm talking about here – you've heard the expressions before. Things like: *I can't do that; I wouldn't know what to do.* To which Paul would answer, and say it with me, **To Each Is Given!**

*I've never done that before.* And Paul says, **To Each Is Given!**

*I'm sure someone else would do a much better job.* **To Each Is Given!**

*Really, I don't have anything useful for the church.* **To Each Is Given!**

And my personal favorite: *I've done my time already.* And before Paul would respond with those four words of his, I feel certain Paul would point out that it's probably not the best thing to refer to serving in God's church as "doing time;" besides the fact that, until you stop breathing and your heart stops beating, your time is most certainly *not* done! I'm sure Paul would've pointed these two things before following them up by saying most emphatically, **To Each Is Given!**

To each is given. And you know, this is such a critical thing for us to think about during the Lenten season. Because you know what we typically do with God's wonderful

gifts this time of year? We give them up! Right? That time-honored tradition of giving something up for Lent. Like chocolate, which my now-wife gave up for Lent two days before our first date; a lovely meal where I, not knowing what she had done, ordered a huge slice of double chocolate cake for dessert. I was just glad she went out with me a second time! Or we “give up” habits, like chewing our nails. Or gossiping.

The act of giving something up for Lent has deep roots in the church's history; but the thing is, it was part of a much more encompassing ritual of fasting and abstinence that put people in a state where they literally had no choice but to focus completely on God. Nowadays, though, it's been trivialized to the point where we give something up, endure crabbiness for forty days, and then gorge ourselves in whatever it is on Easter morning. And honestly, there's not a whole lot that's spiritual about that. Which is why the one thing that I myself have consistently given up for Lent is, in fact, giving up stuff for Lent!

I know that probably sounds strange coming from a pastor, but I actually think Paul would agree with me. After all, what's the point of God-given gifts if we're just giving them up? Isn't there something else we can do to more effectively build up the body of Christ?

I think there is. In fact, today I want to invite you to join me in doing something; ***don't give something up for Lent – take something on!*** You'll notice, if you haven't already, that this is the slogan for our church's Spring Discipleship season. But the thing is, it's not just some cute little slogan. I'm serious about this! *Don't give something up for Lent – take something on!* I mean, if giving up things for Lent is absolutely critical to your spiritual journey, that's fine. But if you're really not inclined to do it; if you've only done it because you always thought that's what you were supposed to do, then let me grant you permission to do as I have done, and give up giving up things this Lent.

And instead, let me challenge you to *take something on* as a spiritual practice this Lent. During these forty days as we journey along with Jesus to the cross and beyond, during our weekly three-way conversations between you, me and God that we call “sermons,” I want to invite you to think about and pray about and ponder what kinds of gifts you have – and you do have them, remember, because what? **To Each Is Given.** You're catching on! I want you to think about the gifts you have and how you are being called to put them to use here in our community and in this church.

And on our Spring Discipleship Dedication Sunday, March 21, the moderators of the Discipleship Ministry Team, Jennifer Logan and Mike Branch, will gather us all in the Fellowship Hall after worship for a covered-dish lunch. And at this lunch there will be tables set up all around the room, and members of your session will be there ready to help you find your place in the work of their ministry teams and in the life of the church. If you've already been in the habit of offering your gifts in the same way every year, I want to encourage you to think outside the box and find new ways to serve, maybe even ways that push your comfort levels a bit. And if you've never made a habit of offering your gifts in church service before, at least on a regular basis, let me plead with you to bring that streak to an end on March 21<sup>st</sup>.

Because Paul said it, folks – *To Each is Given.* You and I have the honor and privilege of serving God in this church. And during this Lenten season, there are four weeks to pray about how we can put our gifts to use. May we do that, and may we do it together. Let's make Paul proud. Let's make God proud! Thanks be to God. AMEN.