

A – Applying Your Spiritual Gifts

John 16:12-15

INTRODUCTION

On April 26, 2006, a passenger van from Taylor University was traveling southbound on I-69 in central Indiana when it collided with a semi-truck that had been traveling northbound before it crossed the median.

Five of the nine people riding in the van died in the crash. They were staff member Monica Felver, and students Elizabeth Smith, Laurel Erb, Bradley Larson, and a young blonde-haired student who was identified by the Grant County Coroner as Whitney Cerak. One of the four surviving passengers, also a blonde-haired woman, was in a coma and in very serious condition. She was identified as Laura Van Ryn.

Due to swelling from severe head trauma, and due to the amazing physical similarities between these two college students, Whitney Cerak was cared for by the Van Ryn family on the mistaken belief that she was, in fact, their daughter, not knowing that their daughter Laura had in fact been the one killed in the accident.

Meanwhile, the Cerak family held funeral services for the other young woman, whom they believed to be their daughter, not knowing that their real daughter, Whitney, was in fact alive and in intensive care at a hospital about an hour away from their home.

More than five weeks passed before the mistaken identity was realized. During that time the Van Ryn family gave extraordinary care to this comatose, blonde-haired college coed that they thought was their daughter Laura. Laura's boyfriend and college roommate were also present in that room for many hours.

As Whitney began to wake up from her coma though, the family and friends at her side began to have this eerie sense that the young woman in the bed might not be Laura after all. Whitney started making comments that seemed strange to the family. She did not appear to know any of their names. Whitney even accused the mom and dad who had maintained a 24-hour vigil at her bedside of being "false parents." The boyfriend and roommate could not find events or other special memories that the young woman in the bed remembered – at least not with the same details they remembered them.

Their concerns, however, were answered by assurances from the medical staff that the young woman had been properly identified as Laura Van Ryn. They were confident that she was their daughter. Her appearance and odd behavior was normal, they said, given the severe head trauma she had experienced.

Finally, and in order to calm the ongoing concerns, the hospital staff asked the young woman whom they and everyone else believed to be Laura Van Ryn to write her name. On that piece of paper, she wrote "Whitney Cerak." Dental records eventually confirmed that Laura had died and Whitney had survived the accident.

This story amazes me. I cannot even imagine a set of circumstances that would make it impossible for me to know my own kids. Surely I would recognize my son's huge hands, Amy's short fingers and Alyssa's dimples. Wouldn't I?

- And yet this family didn't know. They may have wondered, but they lived for weeks with this mistaken identity. Many times as they looked into that bed they wondered...

Who is she really?

Our daughter Alyssa attended Taylor University a couple of years later, and my in-laws live in Grant County IN not far from where this accident happened, so I think about this story often. It came to my mind again as I read the Gospel lesson for today.

- In the overall context for our reading, Jesus is describing to His disciples the transition that is about to take place. He tells them, "I will die, be buried, be resurrected and ascend into heaven, but don't worry. When I get to heaven, I will send someone like me – the Holy Spirit – who will continue to walk with you."

Can you picture the puzzling looks on the faces of those disciples? What is a "Holy Spirit?" These Jewish men were still trying to figure out this whole concept of Jesus as God in the flesh (God incarnate). Now a Holy Spirit?

What will the Holy Spirit look like? How will we know it is the Holy Spirit?

Part of the answer to that question was answered on Pentecost. We celebrated that last week. The Holy Spirit made a rather dramatic entrance on that day. Flames of fire. Speaking in tongues.

Jesus we know. God the Father we know. But who is the Holy Spirit?

Among the ways you know who the Holy Spirit is happens inside you when you start to follow Jesus. Our faith tells us that when we become Christians the Holy Spirit takes residence within us – quite literally "God with us."

- And with the Holy Spirit comes the power of God that enables us to do ordinary things that produce extra-ordinary results.
- For example, the once cowardly Peter preaching and 3,000 people becoming Christians.

This month we have been reacquainting you with our church's approach to fulfilling the Great Commission's mandate to "make disciples." We call it...

Growing in G.R.A.C.E.

This week our focus is on the letter "A" in our Discipleship pathway. It stands for ...

Applying Your Spiritual Gifts

On the basis of Holy Scripture we firmly believe that disciples of Jesus have been created for a divine purpose. We might say it like this:

Who are YOU really? You will never know until you know your spiritual gifts and begin to use them in meaningful ministry.

The Scriptures teach us that every believer in Christ has been given at least one spiritual gift. It is through the use of these gifts that the Holy Spirit's power is displayed, meaning that Christians who use their gifts are tapping into the power of God in what they do.

Scripture clearly instructs us about the importance of knowing our gifts and using them:

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you... (2 Timothy 1:6)

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)

As we apply our gifts, we discover the unique purpose for which God has created us and in so doing discover the "real you."

Every letter in the G.R.A.C.E. acronym comes with three skills and practices – things to learn and do for the fullest application of this area of Christian maturity.

#1: LEARN ABOUT THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

The first for the letter "A" is the most obvious: Begin to learn what the Scriptures teach about spiritual gifts and their importance to the health and vitality of the Christian community.

- As you do, you discover that God designed us all to be in relationship with each other, and that each person is vital to a fully functioning church.

There are three passages of Scripture that list the spiritual gifts:

1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 27-28

Ephesians 4:11-13

Romans 12:6-8

#2: FIND YOUR SPIRITUAL GIFT

The second skill and practice for the letter "A" is to discover your own particular gift. So you have the gift of service? Hospitality? Teaching? Administration? What has God equipped you to do for Him?

- To aid in this discovery, you will want to consider taking a spiritual gifts inventory.

My spiritual gifts are in preaching, faith and leadership. Karen's are in the areas of hospitality and teaching.

- There is no spiritual gift of sitting, so if you think you might have that one, please keep looking!

#3: PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

Finally, and most importantly you will want to find a way to use your gifts in a meaning ministry.

- Remember! That is why God created you. That is how you make the biggest positive impact for His kingdom.
- Each fall we circulate the "Time and Talent" booklet which lists over 100 ministries in our church and community where you might serve. You don't need to wait until fall to sign up for any these – that happens year round. We just make a special effort to remind you of those opportunities in the fall.

APPLICATION

One writer described spiritual gifts like this. He wrote

When I was in the 5th grade, our entire class at was required to take band. At a certain hour of each day we would gather in the band room and attempt to play our instruments. We didn't really have a choice which instruments we played. The instructor simply assigned us instruments based on what the school had available and what he thought each kid was most suited for. I was assigned the saxophone.

And that year, the music instructor had one goal, to help us turn squeaks into notes. I honestly don't know how he survived. We would go home with sheet music to practice, and each day we gathered to play. But when the teacher raised his baton and motioned for us to begin it sounded like a car accident. We played different tempos. We played at different volumes. We didn't watch the conductor. And we didn't listen to each other. And yet in spite of how poorly played, it was a new experience and so each one of us got a certain degree of pleasure out of hearing ourselves play.

By the time I got to the 8th grade, I was a member of the concert band. And that year we performed Beethoven's 1812 Overture for our end-of-the-year concert. Because of the length of the piece it was the only thing we played that night. We had prepared all year to perform this piece. When the house lights went down and the stage lights turned on and the curtain went up, there we sat... all 100 plus members of our band, looking out toward an audience packed with proud moms and dads, brothers and sisters, grandmas and grandpas.

- And when the conductor, Mr. Barkley, raised his baton, we all put our instruments in ready position. I was still on the saxophone. And when he gave that first down stroke of his baton, we didn't all start to play our own different pieces for our own personal enjoyment. We played the 1812 Overture, and we played it together, and we played it for the enjoyment of the audience in front of us.
- And every instrument was needed, from the flutes that played their trills to bring intensity and suspense, to the deep baritones that boomed out notes reminiscent of bombs on a battle field. And even the quiet portions of the piece

were moving as nothing could be heard except for the sound of distant chimes. And without that sound, that one little instrument, something significant would have been lost in the piece. Every instrument was needed.

- And as we played, each instrument followed with precision the movements of the conductor. Every note of our instruments and change in our volume matched the motions and varying levels of intensity of the conductor. And it was awesome. And when the final notes were played we put down our instruments and we rose to take a bow, the audience leapt to their feet and gave a roaring ovation that lasted ten minutes long and brought each one of us to tears because we knew how hard we worked.

We are in an orchestra, you and I together. And each one of us has an instrument that has been given to us. We don't play our own piece, separately from one another for our own personal enjoyment. We play together. And we follow the lead of our conductor... the Holy Spirit.

And as we play our instruments, playing together and following the lead, every expression, every movement of our conductor, then we make beautiful music that brings pleasure to our audience before us, an audience of one, the Lord Jesus Christ.

You are specially gifted by God! You are important to the life and vitality of this church. You make a difference for Jesus as you "Grow in G.R.A.C.E." and apply your spiritual gift.

Keep growing in G.R.A.C.E.!

Amen.