

Epiphany 2, Year A
1 Corinthians 1: 1-9

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California
January 20, 2008

The Gifts We Bring:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Do you remember the Beatles' song, "I get by with a little help from my friends"? I was remembering that song last week as I listened to our youth speak. There was something they said that struck that chord in my memory. They were talking about living into their baptismal covenant. They said, "We need the help of God and we need the help of all of you." Think of it – for them to live into their baptismal covenant, they need the help of all of us. I don't think they're alone in that. We all need the help of one another in order to live fully into the person Christ calls us to be, to live into the richness of God's grace poured out to us.

Being a Christian, being part of the body of Christ, is not something we can do on our own. We need one another. We complement one another. We call one another into being the person God has created us to be. That's what life is like in the body of Christ – one member nourishes and sustains another and each contributes to health of the whole.

As Paul puts it, "The body does not consist of one member but of many....If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members of the body, each one of them as he chose." Think of it, we are members of the body of Christ. Each one of us unique. Each of us bringing our own gifts to the body – lungs breathing in oxygen carried by the blood pumped by the heart. Interdependent parts.

Last week, before the 10:30 service, I watched John Burke and Theo St. Francis rehearse the piece they were to play at the offertory. It was beautiful. Eighty-nine-year-old John Burke counting and coaching and playing together with thirteen-year-old Theo St. Francis. Each calling out a gift of the other and together inspiring others with their music and their shared moment of ministry.

I was reminded of other such moments I have witnessed and experienced – moments when one person has called out the spiritual gifts of another. Sometimes a simple request does the job – asking someone to try something they haven't tried before; sometimes a comment offered draws out in another the recognition that they have a role to play, a gift to give. Sometimes it's a prayer offered or a prayer overheard.

Remember times in your own life when someone has called out in you gifts you didn't even know you had. Remember how that felt. Think of how transforming such moments are.

Remember times in your life when you, by a word or gesture, an observation or a request, have called out the gifts of the spirit others hold.

Moments like that are how we become fully alive in the body of Christ. We can't do that on our own. We need each other.

There's an African proverb that speaks to this point: "I am because we are." It's our life in community, our life with one another, that brings out our individual gifts of the spirit. We can't do this by ourselves. We need the fresh eyes of our fellow members of the body of Christ to see the unseen possibilities of our lives and to draw out the gifts therein.

Tomorrow our country recognizes and celebrates the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. His was a life lived in and formed by the body of Christ. Church was woven into his DNA. Truly, Martin Luther King, Jr. was the person he was because Ebenezer Baptist Church was the community it was. That congregation his father led shaped him, sustained him and called out in him the spiritual gifts he offered our country and the world. I think King would surely say, "I am because Ebenezer Baptist Church is."

But he and we might put another spin on that old proverb. We might just say, "We are because we are." For don't the gifts we call out in each of us through our participation in the Body of Christ make us as a whole more than we would be as simply the sum of our parts? I think so. The body of Christ we know as Trinity Episcopal Church is because we are.

Next week at our Celebration of New Ministry, we, as a community, will participate in a ritual exchange of gifts – gifts that represent the various ministries and gifts for ministry we bring to this community. Bishop Beisner will give me water symbolizing our shared ministry of baptism. I will give John Burke a hymnal representing the ministry of music in our parish. Representatives of the parish will give me bread and wine. I will, in turn, give the youth of our parish a hammer and a t-square recognizing the role they play in building the church of tomorrow. At the base of all of this is the recognition that we call out in one another the gifts of ministry we need to build up the body of Christ, that we see in one another the vast and often untapped potential that God has so abundantly given us.

As Paul said to the church of God at Corinth, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus." We are because we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.