

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 62:1-5
SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
THE GOSPEL: John 2:1-11

Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 20, 2019

“Activating Spiritual Gifts”
Sermon Preached by Pastor Lowell D. Nelson
American Lutheran Church of Sun City

Grace and peace through our Savior, Jesus Christ, to you. Amen

I struggled to prepare this sermon, probably the first time that I have gone through that in the three and one-half months I have been here. It was based upon an experience I have had at other congregations. I just want to share that struggle with you, and then move right through it. That struggle came this way, I like the idea of spiritual gifts. In fact, at Bethany Lutheran in Elkhorn and at Immanuel Lutheran in Bellevue, Nebraska, I got really excited about inventories to discover your spiritual gifts. Perhaps you have seen these documents. You can answer questions and they help identify what your God given gifts are. There are a variety of instruments, but they generally are meant to be helpful to discern what God has given you.

In that excitement, I was thinking that lots of people would be interested in this. The answer was – not so much. It’s not in any way trying to say anything bad about these congregations, they are wonderful congregations. What I’m trying to say is it is our human reluctance. In fact, I talked to somebody I knew that was interested in their spiritual life. I said, “What gives, I thought you would come to this retreat and learn more about your spiritual gifts and put a plan together to use them.” His response was this.. “If I know what they are, then I’ll be expected to use them.” We kind of chuckle and we kind of cry because in a way that describes the human condition – this idea of being gifted by God.

I was thinking of some of the tender things that happened as we grow up. Perhaps you had a gift that at least you thought it was a gift and you probably in your life have experienced negative feedback, somebody thinking that is not a gift. Perhaps that has harmed your ability to move forward, certainly it impacted my life for a while. It is this very intimate thing of spiritual gifts given, our very lives given for the common good, the Kingdom of God. So what I am going to try to do is encourage you that this is the day which the Lord has made, it is a great day to begin using the gifts that God has given you for the sake of this church, for the sake of your family, for the sake of our community, and the world.

I want to start with the Gospel message itself. On the third day, now that could be understood as the third day of a wedding, or the third day after Jesus’ baptism. I’ll go with

that. Weddings went on a long time in the old days, up to seven days, a week. Can you imagine as the father of one daughter, I am so glad it didn't go on for seven days. One afternoon and a night was enough for me, but this idea of continuing celebration, so wine running out would be a major faux pas, this would be incredibly inhospitable.

I could preach it this way – isn't it great to have a supportive mother? Here's Mary, she sees her son, she brings up that she is proud of him. I think there is a dimension there. This interplay, this word when he uses the word *woman*, it is a term of respect, he also uses it once more in the Scriptures when he is on the cross. "Woman" and then he gives her to John to take care of. So this intimacy that they have. I'll just say this, she helped activate this sign, this gift, she helped activate it, she saw what was needed and she had faith in his gifts. Now that is one way to interpret this, that's why I wanted to say to you that activation often comes with somebody seeing something in you that you may not see yourself. Perhaps you have experienced this in life where somebody sees in you, perhaps an excellent teacher back in your elementary, middle school or high school days. Or perhaps your spouse, or a co-worker, a boss, a pastor. I would pray that this church would be known as a place of encouragement where we see each other as gifts of God, and the manifestation of God's love is through our activation of this. Do whatever he tells you.

This first sign, this first miracle, is rather subdued in the sense that it wasn't for a big crowd, very few people knew about this. We have the benefit of scripture, it wasn't like it was trumpeted, in fact the steward was just complimenting about keeping the best stuff for last. This revealing of glory shows the intimacy, it's not how many people you touch, but who you touch in Jesus' name. I ask you to take any burden about how big it is to make a difference, just use what God has given you. This encouragement is also important for the church, for us. In the three and a half months that I have been here, I was going to give a polite challenge. It is so fun, as we get to know each other, that we usually start with "where are we from?" Minnesota, Wisconsin, I can do a good guess, I can do about 72% of the congregation if I guess Minnesota or Wisconsin. We have some outliers from Michigan, Ohio, South Dakota, even a few from Nebraska, but you know what I would like to do in this year coming up, I love to know where you are from and your interests, but wouldn't it be great if we shared "and here is my spiritual gift, here is where God is calling me to use that spiritual gift."

I have an interest this year, we have a team put together. Ann Jones has a gift of putting teams together, and it is a volunteer initiative. She is going to speak on it briefly at the annual meeting on Tuesday, but it is as simple as this. We have amazing talents, we have amazing opportunities to serve. I chuckle to myself because I can make solemn high faluting about using your gifts. Would somebody please pull the damn weeds out there, right? Excuse me for that, but that's the life of the church, right? We want to be at these places of healing and reconciliation and yet we let these things get to us. If you have the gift

of pulling weeds or doing those things, it's important to put it into play. It often is so practical in the church, we have to be practical. But it is all of this together, for the sake of our church. Let me put it this way, I look at you as this incredible smorgasbord of gifts. You know that when you bring what you like to make to a potluck or a smorgasbord, people are able to taste what you have made and you are able to taste what other people bring. That's what activating spiritual gifts is all about. It is not our own reason or strength, it's not a matter of the will, it is understanding Luther, this understanding that God calls us and enlightens us. We use that phrase in Luther's understanding of the Third Article – enlightens us with his gifts. I love that understanding that we are enlightened with the love of Christ and we are able to enlighten the load for others, we are able to show the way. It is for the common good, the manifestation. That's what epiphany is all about, making it clear.

I want to move to the 1 Corinthians text, which is so beautiful. We still have the same issues in church, which is if somebody demonstrates some spiritual gifts that are outside the norm, we get very uncomfortable, we also have some people who believe that their spiritual gifts are better than others. Not so much in this congregation, but certainly in the church itself. I just know that God has given you a gift, and this working of the word *miracles*, I just want to concentrate on that for a second. Miracles is a great word. In being here these three and a half months, I have heard of miracles in our congregational member's lives. Miracles of healing, absolutely, the power of God to move in ways that are beyond our comprehension. I have certainly heard of miracles of reconciliation. The word miracle itself is a very active word. It actually is the root word of dynamic, or dynamite. That's what the miracle word translates into. It is actions that we make on behalf of the other.

I wanted to share a miracle story. It was just celebrated this past week. The hero was a man named Chelsey. You know who I am speaking of. He has a nickname, maybe you remember that – Sully. Sully landed flight 1549 in the Hudson River off of Manhattan after both engines were disabled by a bird strike. All 155 persons were saved, four were injured quite extensively. Wasn't that amazing? Do you remember that? That miracle comes in this way. He grew up in Texas, he joined the Mensa International Association at the age of 12. So he separated himself, he was President of the Latin Club. This is no dummy, right? Isn't it amazing how God had someone who had the intelligence to evaluate in a very quick amount of time what needed to be done. If you remember, afterwards I think some of us were shocked that there was a review of what he did if it was appropriate. Do you remember that? I think if I remember, in the article I read it said, "Theoretically he could have returned back to the airport." But that's not taking into account for the time that decision would have to be made almost immediately, and for the potential loss of life if it wouldn't have worked. Right? He is thinking of all those other people. It would have been beyond comprehension if that plane would have hit Manhattan skyline. In this, he was able to pull off a miracle because he used the gifts that God had given him. He said it this way, "One way of looking at this might be that for 42 years I have been making small regular deposits in this bank of

experience, education and training. On January 15, the balance was sufficient so that I could make a very large withdrawal.”

I want to encourage you that the gifts that God has been giving you, your experiences, your education, your training, your God-given gifts are called upon to be released. That’s my last punch line for you – how do we release?

It is a matter of submission to God’s will, it’s not a matter of will power. I am going to be more active in my spiritual gifts, I am going to be more active in my life. I don’t think that fades, and often in this, it takes difficult experiences to be able to release that. It’s almost like a fire that releases the seeds for those giant sequoias, it takes that. I don’t know if you knew this, but Sully’s father had committed suicide 15 years earlier. He had been in a very difficult situation after a hospital stay and had a long convalescence ahead of him, and left no note, he died by suicide. The result of this, Sully has become a suicide prevention activist. He promoted the National Suicide Prevention Week, National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. It takes these difficult experiences in which we have broken down our will and open to God’s love.

This word to go and serve, for our congregation to be enthusiastic, to encourage others to see where their gifts are, and to be encouraged ourselves. I wanted to end with a story. When I was a younger person in high school, I took water safety instruction courses to be a lifeguard. I didn’t actually serve as a life guard, but I had the training. I was working in the fields of Hoegemeyer Hybrids instead. I would go to the pool, I had been trained, I liked the life saving courses that I took. So I was well trained. I went down with a friend to Peony Park, which was a large park and pool in the big city of Omaha, about 70 miles away. We were down there to enjoy the day, from a small town in Nebraska, and as we looked out, it’s a very large pool. In my mind, it’s almost as big as this sanctuary, it was very large. As I looked out, we could see a man struggling, all the classic signs, and it was the deep part of the pool. I knew exactly what to do, I had been well trained, I knew how to swim, I knew how to approach, I knew how to calm or overpower and take the person down for their own good to save them and bring them back to shore. I knew all these things. But I just looked, and my friend Reid said, “GO!” I had been trained for that word GO, that’s what the instructor always said, and I was missing that word GO. It unleashed everything, and I was able to save that person. It was a good experience, but I was frozen because I needed that activating word.

I don’t know how to translate that for you, except to say this – GO, use your gifts, you are beautifully positioned to use every gift that God has given you. Don’t be frozen, when you see it, go, and bring it to the glory of God. Not a matter of will, but being used by God.

And start your day with this beautiful prayer. God, use me. Amen

