FILLING IN YOU BLANKS
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

FOCUS: THE MARK OF A TRUE DISCIPLE OF Jesus Christ is commitment to his lordship and faithful attention to the productive use of God given gifts.

Ours is a rather complicated text this morning. Paul is clearly aware of what Jesus said in both Mark and Matthew about the “unforgivable sin”. There Jesus declares that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only sin which cannot be forgiven. We generally think of blasphemy in terms of speech and words. But words were not the primary focus for either Jesus or Paul. That is not to say our words are unimportant, but here Paul is focused on far more than just what comes out of one’s mouth. It is a demanding message for us. Fully comprehended it carries a warning for each one of us and calls us all to accountability.

As he wrote this letter to the Corinthian church Paul was disappointed to have encountered divisions and conflict among various factions. He had witnessed disturbing displays of pride and arrogance in the church. Paul would, no doubt, have some of the same concerns were he to show up today. We see it all the time, to the detriment of our witness.

Those who prefer formal liturgical worship look down their noses at what they disparage as performance style worship with its electronic instruments, light shows, and modern lyrics. They are convinced that their worship is what Jesus would have worship be like Those who prefer contemporary worship turn up their noses at what they consider to be the outdated style of high church orders of worship with creeds, organs and centuries old music. They are equally convinced that Jesus would affirm their style as being more relevant. Frank will no doubt witness both high moments of worship filled with the presence of God’s Spirit, and self-righteous bitterness over sensitive issues when he goes to Seattle this spring as a delegate to General conference. On one side of the debate over sexuality will be those who, as they do every year, will organize demonstrations and attempt to disrupt the flow of the conference. On the other side will be those who seek not only to stop the demonstrations but also to quiet the protesters’ voices through procedural manipulation. And both camps will proclaim loudly that they are on God’s side of a very complex issue.

I know godly folks on both sides of this and many other divisive issues. I have my opinions on them all. I think some of my friends are wrong and some of my friends think I am as well. But if we disagree on some important issues yet still can agree on the fundamental matters of the faith there is no reason we should have to put aside our friendship. Neither do we have any right to disrespect others who honestly disagree with us. Arrogance is to be avoided at all cost for it is so often at the root of our divisions and the seed of hard feelings. It is one thing to have strong opinions, it is another to maintain an attitude of superiority over those with whom we disagree.

It was arrogance that Paul confronted at the church in Corinth. At the center of the concern was the matter of speaking in tongues. Those who practiced that discipline had adopted an attitude of superiority. They were convinced that they had attained a higher level of spirituality, had acquired a superior gift, one those differently gifted had failed to attain. Paul didn’t discredit the authenticity of the spiritual experiences of those who spoke in ecstatic language. The practice wasn’t the issue. What troubled Paul was the way some were using this spiritual experience, this gift, to claim special power and superior status in the community. In our text Paul is responding to the disruptive and self-aggrandizing manipulation of personal experiences by some. More about gifts in a few moments.

When Paul speaks of those who say ***“Let Jesus be cursed”*** and those who say ***“Jesus is Lord”*** he is not worried about vocabulary. You remember Jesus himself said that not all who say to him ***“Lord Lord”*** will enter the kingdom of God, only those who do the Father’s will. We all know folks who talk the talk but clearly fail to walk the walk. To be honest we are all those people on occasion. God knows that to be the case and offers grace as a solution for all who willingly and honestly confront their inability to be completely faithful. That is one of the great joys which accrue to those who humbly and honestly say with their lives that Jesus is Lord. As we seek, though be it with limited success, to be ever attentive to the Spirit we need not despair when we are less than faithful, for grace calls us to simply put failures behind us and to move forward, .

Paul clearly understood what it was like to fail from time to time. I love his honesty in the letter to the Romans. There Paul writes, ***“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”*** Those with whom Paul had a bone to pick in Corinth were the pious type who would never utter blasphemous words from their mouths. They were those folks who would feign absolute horror were they to hear anyone speak against Jesus or God, those who would gleefully tell any who would listen, and some who really didn’t want to, of the perceived sins of others. But it was just these folk that Paul condemned. They didn’t have to use any words to convict themselves, they were convicted by their actions. While their mouths would never have dared curse Jesus, their lives did so daily.

Paul didn’t challenge those proud of their gift of tongues because they were imperfect. He knew what it was to be a sinner himself. What Paul did challenge was their self-righteous attitude. What a contrast. Here is Paul the one who was the first successful missionary, the one who was willing to face prison and even death for his faith. Paul honestly confronted his sin and even proclaimed it for all to hear. But there was a faction in the church in Corinth who were blinded to their need for grace by their foolish attitude of superiority.

So how does Paul confront the problem? Paul was a pretty clever guy who was also fully capable of a bit of sarcasm. I must say I kind of like that about him. Paul begins by writing that he doesn’t want the Corinthians to be uninformed. He is almost certainly making a subtle jab at his target audience with those words. The ones for whom his message was most intended were those who would freely proclaim that they were anything but uninformed. He was writing to those who were certain that they had it all together, who were convinced that they had the answers for all questions and that others did not.

There is a cautionary message here for us all. We are called to be more like Paul and less like the “tongues” faction of the Corinthian church. We are called to confront ***our*** sin, accept ***our*** limited wisdom, to recognize ***our*** fallibility. And as we do that we are to avoid judgmental arrogance at all cost, remembering, as Paul reminded that early church, that we were once those who didn’t fully know God. Indeed we are still those, but we can know enough to make our lives different and other worldly. And when we do we become far better ambassadors for the faith.

In his latest book, **Vanishing Grace: What Ever Happened to the Good News ?** Philip Yancey writes, ***“Nowadays the principle of tolerance rules above all others, and any religion that claims a corner on truth is suspect. Combine that with Christians’ reputation for judging others’ behavior, and no wonder opposition heats up.***

***As one critic remarked, 'Most people I meet assume that Christian means very conservative, entrenched in their thinking, anti-gay, anti-choice, angry, violent, illogical, empire builders; they want to convert everyone, and they generally cannot live peacefully with anyone who doesn’t believe what they believe.'***

***Jesus never commanded us to score well in opinion polls, but as I mull over the list of words people use to describe Christians I wonder how we can act as salt and yeast within a society that views us so negatively."***

The answer to Yancey’s question, my answer not his, though his would be similar I believe, is that we can act as salt and yeast, as we are commanded to do, only by being those whose lives say ***“Jesus is Lord.”*** And we do that only as we allow the Spirit to guide our way.

Yancey is not saying that we must have no strong feelings on issues, nor is he advocating simply adopting a live and let live attitude to our faith. He is facing reality. Tolerance is a popular principle of our times and we must so live within that environment that others are drawn to our faith. Unfortunately the attitudes Yancey mentions are far too common among we who claim Jesus as Lord these days. Such rarely bring folks into the kingdom, more often they drive folks away. And Paul would say ***“Your attitudes, you anger, your self-righteousness speak far more loudly than your proclamations that Jesus is Lord and they do more damage than good.”*** And he might well go on to say as he did later in this very letter, ***“Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.”*** Yes, believe it or not you can stand firm, be courageous and be strong and still do everything in love. We have a perfect example of such living in the life of the one whose name we claim.

Having subtly, but firmly chastised both the Corinthians and most of us, Paul turns to the matter of spiritual gifts. First he makes clear the truth that they are indeed gifts distributed by the Spirit. One of the problems with those who were speaking in tongues was that they were proudly taking credit for having developed the practice. It was a bit like it would have been had those three winners this week taken credit for having been so wise as to win the lottery. It was blind luck which made those folks unbelievably wealthy. Most likely a machine chose the numbers for them. And even if they chose their own, it was a machine which popped up the balls and made them winners. They were simply lucky. That is not to say that our spiritual gifts are obtained by luck, anything but that. Still, it is just as foolish for us to take pride in what we have been given by God’s grace as would it be for the lotto winner to claim winning was a matter of personal effort and skill.

Paul proclaims that our spiritual gifts are just that, gifts, then he reminds us, as he reminded the Corinthians, that there are many different gifts, that we are all gifted in some way by the Spirit, and that all gifts are of equal worthy when offered to God in service to each other and to all of God’s people. In God’s eyes there are no big gifts and no small gifts, no important gifts and no unimportant gifts, just gifts. Paul then lists some spiritual gifts. Frankly most of them seem rather spectacular. Wisdom, healing, miracles, prophecy. Elsewhere Paul includes other gifts.

What we have in today’s scripture is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Paul was simply making the point that different folks had been gifted in different ways. I suspect were he to be around today he might offer a different list. I imagine him including such things as encouragement, compassion, discernment, teaching, cooking, parenting, praying, listening, creating, you get the idea. So I tell you boldly, you have been gifted by God’s own Spirit for a particular ministry. You have the gift, now it is your task to put it to work.

Most of us, not all, but most, have on occasion procured a new mobile phone. You Apple folks get that option every other week. It can be exciting to have that new gadget. As soon as you take it out of the package you can admire it, play with it, and perhaps even open a few functions. But if you ever intend on using it as intended what must you do? You have to activate your phone or it is mostly useless. Twice in our text Paul notes that it is God who through the Holy Spirit activates our spiritual gifts. The Spirit gifts us and them stands ready to activate those gifts. If you just admire your phone and refuse to make the call to activate it, you will never have access to the vast potential in that little device.

So it is when it come to our spiritual gifts. We all have them. It might surprise you to know that it is really not that difficult to discern what they are. They are the things you already do well. But for them to be fully functional they must be activated by the spirit, empowered so that they might reach their full potential. But unlike our phones which are activated for our amusement, our spiritual gifts are activated for the benefit of each other, and for the building up of God’s kingdom. Paul declares that we are each gifted by the Sprit for the common good. As we have already seen, Paul was not opposed to the gift of speaking in tongues. The problem he had with those people was that they were using the gift to their personal benefit at the expense of others and they were denigrating the gifts of others, saying in essence, ***“Let Jesus be Cursed”.*** Oh they would never say the words, but they didn’t have to.

I declare to you that we are a gifted group! Some of our gifts may be spectacular by the measures used by the world, some may be rather mundane by such. But I proclaim that properly activated for the common good, they are all spectacular. As we close this morning I ask you to make a commitment to do two things over the next few days. First take an inventory of your gifts. Simply consider what it is that you do well. Kathy will tell you that I am not a gifted housekeeper. But some of you are. I accepted the fact long ago that I am not a particularly gifted teacher of children, but some of you are. I know and regret that I can at times be oblivious to the needs of those around me, but some of you seem to always know what folks need and are always willing to meet those needs. So over the next few days be aware and don’t be afraid to declare to yourself boldly and with pride ***“I am gifted to \_\_\_\_\_.”***

Then, having identified and affirmed your gift, prayerfully allow the Sprit to activate it! For your sake, for the common good of all and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who gifts us all, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy spirit, AMEN.