

What's that Noise?
I Corinthians 12
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Imagine you're sitting in the Overture Center with thousands of other people anxiously waiting to hear a favorite, beloved piece of music. The Symphony Orchestra, eighty to one hundred of some of the city's best musicians are all in place. Each section, the strings, brass, woodwinds, percussion, are all waiting. The conductor comes to the center, lifts his baton, the anticipation of the beautiful music stirs your soul, the baton comes down, and then the house is filled with a noise as yet you have never heard! Every instrument is playing their part...every part is filling their space...but because they have not tuned together, it's an abrasive, grating noise!

Now imagine, you're sitting again in the Overture Center, same scenario as before and this time everyone tunes to the principle oboist's perfect acoustic 440 A, the baton comes down but only the brass plays the entire symphony, or the woodwinds, or the strings. Beautiful for awhile...but then our ears want to hear the fullness of the whole orchestra...the depth and richness of each instrument flowing ~ in and out of all the others, blending to create a musical life ~ sound waves washing upon your ears with the synergy of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

This is another way to illustrate what Paul is talking about in I Corinthians 12. We've heard about the Body of Christ so many times that we don't even hear it anymore...but we need to hear it. We need to hear it so that our life together as a community of faith is full, and rich, and deep, flowing in and out, fine tuned to the One who loves us perfectly, not focused on any one section too long, but blending all parts, to create a witness of God's love where the gifts of each one combines with all others for the common good.

There are four New Testament books that list "gifts," Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, and I Peter. If we add up each list there are twenty-one but in other New Testament books there are at least another ten named, so does that mean there are thirty-one...absolutely not! Again, the sum of the whole is greater than the parts...the gifts are limitless because God is limitless. There are eight words in the New Testament translated "gift," everything from a divine favor, to a legal transaction, to "charisma" which is what Paul uses in this 12th chapter of I Corinthians, and the distinct definition of "charisma" from the Greek is a gift that must be used, for it's a gift for a reason, with a purpose: the reason to build up the church, the purpose to serve the world!

When we are open to the Spirit and receive the Spirit's gifts, our lives are enriched and strengthened individually, communally and globally. As one theologian said, "The vital dynamic of the Spirit's presence is always to bring unity, oneness of purpose, singleness of goal—the common good."¹ But this unity does not mean uniformity; rather it is an amazing expression of the Spirit in multi-formity: a symphony orchestra combining all its parts ~ a body interconnected, interdependent on one another for the healthy function of the whole, as well as the individual parts. If we do not embrace our gifts and use them for the common good, our community of faith becomes flat, not well tuned, and has a crippling effect on individual members and a ripple effect of the same in the world.

The gifts God gives bring life, energy, vision, creativity. The gifts impact every aspect of our life together: our attitudes, our behaviors, and our relationships.² When the gifts are used we will see the fruits of the Spirit among us, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Whatever the church needs to be, that beautiful symphony of witness, that is what God in grace gives. God has, and is, giving Covenant the gifts we need to be the church God is calling us to be, a beautiful symphony of witness in Madison and around the world.

Covenant is an incredibly gifted church, thanks be to God! We are strong in faith. We are strong in worship. We are strong in service. We are strong in our children's ministry. We are strong in our youth ministry. We are strong in mission. We are growing in our deepening relationships with God and others. We are growing in our commitment to work for justice. We are growing in our stewardship in meeting the responsibilities of our building. We are growing in our ministry to the elderly. We are growing in our awareness not to compare one person's gifts to another or one area of ministry to another. When each area of our church is functioning well, the church grows, and is built up in love. On the flip side, when we focus on just one area or two, it works for awhile, just like listening to the percussion section or the strings in a symphony works for awhile but then there is the longing for all the instruments to be heard ~ a longing for all the gifts to be offered in a coordinated effort bringing forth glory and honor and praise to God who is our great conductor.

This summer, in our sermon series, "Receiving the Spirit, Embracing our gifts," we've been tuning; tuning our hearts to the Spirit who gives us all the perfect note. So that in confidence, we're ready to work and play together, all of us watching our "great conductor" knowing that just as a symphony conductor, guides each section, each instrument, "forte here, piano there," ...listening for the beautiful blending of the whole sound, so it is with God, who masterly moves us to use our all our gifts, activities and services, "more here, less there," to bring forth in actions and words a beautiful "noise" as yet no one has ever heard. And then when others ask, "What's that noise," the answer will be, "that's Covenant Presbyterian, using their gifts ~ being the church!"