

**Gift Oriented Ministry**  
**Natural Church Development Sermon Series #03**  
**April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008**

**Series: Natural Church Development**  
**Scripture: Romans 12:3-8**

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on April 20<sup>th</sup>,  
2008 at Northminster Presbyterian Church.**

This spring we are preaching on what makes for a healthy church. I believe that we are on the brink of some rather exciting times in the life of this congregation, and I want to use this series to focus on how we can grow healthily using the diagnostic tools of the Word of God and the research of Christian Schwartz in Natural Church Development. Focusing on the eight characteristics of healthy churches which Schwartz and his team found from researching over a thousand churches worldwide, last week we talked about Empowering Leadership. This week we are focusing on Gift Oriented Ministry.

Some of you may remember the commercial that Federal Express ran a number of years ago. It spoofed the movie Castaway, in which Tom Hanks played a FedEx worker whose company plane went down, stranding him on a desert island for years. In the commercial a bedraggled man, in a tattered FedEx uniform, goes up to the door of a suburban home, with a package in his hand.

When the lady comes to the door, he explains that he survived five years on a deserted island, and during the whole time the thing which kept him alive was his promise to deliver the package if he survived his ordeal.

She gives a simple, "Thank you!" Because he is curious about what is in the package that he has been protecting for years, he says, "If I may ask, what was in that package after all?"

She opens it and shows him the contents, saying, "Oh, nothing really; just a satellite telephone, a global positioning device, a compass, a water purifier, and some seeds."

When it comes to gift oriented ministry, I fear that too many of us are like the man in that advertisement. God has given us everything we need to do the work he has called us to do, but we are afraid to open the box and use the gifts which God has given us.

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Paul's letter to the church at Rome was written to a group of people he didn't know trying to give instruction in what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The first eleven chapters are some of his most mature writings on Christian doctrine. However, in the twelfth chapter he begins to apply the doctrine to everyday life. He begins with the impersonal, and he moves to the personal. One of the first instructions he gives is on the use of the gifts which he believes God gives to everyone.

I hope it is not an oversimplification, but here is an outline of what he is saying in verses 3-8:

- 1) Know Yourself;
- 2) Use Your Gifts;
- 3) Honor God with the Gift.

Paul begins the passage by urging his readers not to have right sized opinions of themselves. The Greek word which the NRSV translates as "sober judgment" is *phroneo*. It literally means thinking objectively or comprehending a subject. However this is not the kind of reasoning we get from books. We might translate it as a "gut check." It is an honest assessment of who we are and what we can do; not thinking too highly of ourselves or to think too lowly of ourselves. Some might call it 'right sized thinking.'

Paul says that God gives each one of us a gift. If God gave you and me a gift and we are not using that gift, we are not giving honor to the one who created us. The problem with too many of us is that we think in extremes. We either have inflated ideas of our own importance or we think we are worthless. Right sized thinking allows us to acknowledge that we are created in the image of God, and that God does not make junk. So Paul urges his readers to do a gut check. He begins with the assumption that they are gift because they are created in the image of God. The questions on the table are these: How will they use the gift God has given them? Where do they fit into the body of Christ?

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In Lancaster, PA they have a school called the Phoenix Academy. It is named after the Greek myth of the Phoenix which rises from the ashes because most of the students there are overage, and they have burned their academic bridges so many times that this is a last chance for them. It is their last chance to rise from the ashes and make something of themselves.

At the Junior High level the students range in age from 16 to 18 years old. If there were in a normal Junior High they would be age inappropriate. They have failed so many times that they need a special environment where they have a chance at completion. At the Senior High level the students may be 19-21 years old. They would not fit into your typical high school either, but they want to graduate in spite of the failures they have had in their lives.

The principle of Phoenix Academy's major hurdle is helping these young adults to believe they were worth something and that they could contribute to society. So through a very structured program, they help each of the young adults discover that just because they have failed in the past, it doesn't mean that they are worthless or dumb.

When the first two students graduated from Phoenix Academy, everyone in the school, teachers and students alike, let out a cheer.

Sometimes I feel like we need a Phoenix Academy for some of the members of our church. Life has beaten them down, and they need a special effort to realize that they are created in the image of God and after the likeness of God. God has given each of us a gift which we can use to benefit others, and wouldn't it be wonderful if, when one of us discovered that, we all gave a cheer?!

So the first thing we have to do is to affirm that we have been given a gift. Then we have to use that gift. No two of us have the same gift, but all of us have at least one gift. Paul says that god has given each of us a gift according to our faith, and when they are all put together we represent the hands and the feet, the arms and the legs of Jesus Christ in the world. We don't have to do it all, but we are each given a gift so we can do our part.

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Sometime ago someone sent me the story of Lynette LeGette. She lives in Louisville, KY, and one day she read a newspaper article on the number of people who receive chemotherapy every year in Louisville. There are 21,800 patients per year, and a large number of those lost their hair as a side effect of the treatment.

When Lynette discovered this, it brought her to tears. She prayed about what she could do, and she learned that many of the patients complain about being cold during the night and wrap pajamas or towels around their heads to keep warm, she felt she had her answer. She said, "I love to sew. Maybe I could do something to help them, but then I thought I couldn't possibly meet that need. It seemed an overwhelming project."

However, she felt called to do something, so she recruited six volunteers from her church and in 18 months they had made 1,000 turbans. They provided them at no charge to those in need. Listen to what she says, "When you ask the Lord what you should do, you need to be willing to listen for the direction and recognize the opportunities he give you." (The Southeast Outlook 12-16-04)

The first task is to identify your gift. The second task is to use your gift.

Finally, you honor God with the gift which God has given you. Paul says we have gifts that differ according to the grace which has been given us. The Greek word is *charismata* which is a derivation of the word *charisma*. It refers to a gift given by God which could not otherwise be obtained. The gift you have you were given by God. You can't take credit for it. You can only use it.

Let me give you an example. I love to sing, but if we depended on my musical leadership alone for this service, things would be pretty bad. However, God has sent us Ashley and Arlene, and Mark and God has placed a passion in their hearts for music. It isn't about performance for them. It is about honoring God with the gift which God has given them, and with their help we are all lifted a little higher in our praise of Almighty God.

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I love teenagers, but I could not do what Chris Jones and Rebecca Brandau do with our teenagers. I absolutely believe that having a smooth running office is vital to ministry, but that certainly is not my gift. Thankfully, Cami McColley fills that role for our congregation and she fills it very well.

In the past I have received a goodly amount of good-natured teasing. When someone needs to get everyone's attention, they tend to turn to me, because I can project my voice well over crowds. I have heard people talk about how easy it is to listen to me and that I challenge folks in my preaching. They have gone on and on about this and even said they wished they had a voice or talent like mine. Finally I said, "You all talk about my voice and preaching as if I had something to do with it. It is a gift from God. I did nothing to earn it. All I can do is to use it to the best of my ability and give God the glory as I do."

Our Congregational Nominating Committee will soon begin their work preparing to nominate a new class of elders and deacons. This process is always full of surprises. But the biggest of all surprises came in a church where a member was approached to be an elder.

Now those of you who do not know, we have three ordained offices in the PCUSA: Minister of the Word and Sacrament, Elder, and Deacon. Each office serves a different function. Ministers are charged with Preaching and Teaching. Elders are charged with spiritual oversight of the congregation, and Deacons are charged with serving the people. In some churches it is perceived as a hierarchy of office and not a shared leadership. Before you can be an Elder in some congregations, you have to have served as a Deacon.

Well, when this woman was approached to serve on the Session, she said that she was honored to be asked, but she didn't feel called to be an Elder. However, if the Nominating Committee wanted to consider her as a Deacon, she would be honored to serve. She said, "God has given me the gift of service, and it is my responsibility to honor God with the gift God has given me, not try to be someone I am not."

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This week as I have been studying the Bible and the resources we have on Natural Church Development I have thought to myself how different our ministry would be if the people of this church would set it as a priority to discover the gift that God has given them and then come to me and the leaders of this congregation and say, "How does this fit in with the direction we are moving as a congregation?" How different it would be if our job was to empower you to use the gift that God has given you to glorify God's name!

Know yourself. Use your gift. Honor God with that gift. These are the foundations of a gift oriented ministry.