

“Manifesting the Spirit”
January 14, 2007

Isaiah 62:1-5
1 Corinthians 12:1-11

I know this may seem strange, but all last week I kept envisioning Steve Jobs and the apostle Paul on two different stages, each of them talking to a different audience. On one stage, I saw Jobs, head of Apple Computer – now Apple, Inc. – tall, thin, and in his faded jeans and running shoes. And on the other, I saw Paul of Tarsus, someone I’ve never imagined as tall, in his 1st century tunic, cloak, and sandals.

Not surprisingly, Jobs is at MacWorld, describing and demonstrating the latest Apple creation – the iPhone. It’s an amazing thing, and hundreds, maybe thousands, of people are enthralled as he describes it. The iPhone is a phone, a computer, a camera, a palm-sized entertainment center. With it, you can send and receive instant messages, text messages, voice messages, and e-mail messages. You can get on the internet and do silly things like looking at what different people claim to be the ugliest cat in the world. You can do serious things like reading Supreme Court opinions or presidential speeches. And you can do truly important things like checking the weather forecasts for all the towns and cities where your family and friends live. You can also watch movies, listen to music, and enjoy your own and your friends’ photo albums. And, no doubt, you can play all sorts of games, check your bank balance, and even type out a sermon.

On the other stage – or maybe just standing in someone’s home – far away from MacWorld, is Paul. He looks a little weary and a little dusty from all the traveling he does. In contrast to Steve Job’s presentation, Paul’s presentation isn’t eye-catching, but, still, there’s something about Paul that draws people’s attention to him. Standing before the gathered people, Paul starts talking about spiritual gifts, and the people begin to pay even closer attention to his message. They listen carefully because they’ve been arguing about who has what gifts within this new faith community and arguing about which gifts are most important. Some of the community members may have been claiming that they possessed a wide range of spiritual gifts and abilities, but others may have doubted that they had any at all. Some may have argued that their gifts were the most important, and others may have thought that their spiritual gifts were utterly insignificant.

Knowing that the subject of spiritual gifts has been a source of tension and division, Paul starts by reminding the community that *all* spiritual gifts come from the same God, the same Spirit, and that every one of those manifestations of the Spirit is given *for the common good*. Paul then lists a variety of gifts, saying that one person may manifest the Spirit through wisdom, another through knowledge, another through faith or healing or miracles, and yet another through prophecy or discernment or interpretation. It’s a good list, not exhaustive, of course, but it points toward the abundance and the diversity of spiritual gifts that a community of God’s people can have and needs to have.

So that’s the vision I’ve been having the last several days, with Steve Jobs on one stage and Paul on another. It’s quite a contrast. Steve Jobs and the iPhone hold out the possibility of endless possibilities – just think, if, today, Apple can fold all those different

types of capabilities into one itty bitty handheld cell phone extraordinaire, what *other* kinds of things, what other kinds of *gifts*, so to speak, might the folks at Apple or somewhere else be able to put into another portable gadget? Greater capacities, a broader range of applications, faster, better, smaller – all these things aren't just *likely*; they're *certain*.

And over on that other stage, in a house church or a synagogue, what possibilities is Paul holding out? In a way, he's holding out the possibility – the *understanding* – that what *we* bring to the table, what *we're* able to do and to give, is *limited*, not endless. He's also offering the possibility, the understanding, that the gifts we have are not of our *own* choosing but are, instead, shaped and determined by the Spirit of God. And, Paul tells us, the Spirit is inviting us to discover our gifts and to remember that we are called to use them *for the common good*.

So what *are* these things called “spiritual gifts”? What are the manifestations of the Spirit that can work for the common good? For the church in Corinth, Paul lists several kinds of spiritual gifts, and my sense is that what he names are the gifts he has already seen at work among the Corinthian Christians. The gifts include the utterance of wisdom, the utterance of knowledge, prophecy, the working of miracles, faith, healing, discernment, tongues, and the interpretation of tongues.

After only eight months as your minister and exactly one year since the very first Sunday I ever stood up here, I can tell you, with confidence and joy, that this congregation has those gifts and more. You manifest the Spirit for the common good through prophecy, not prophecy as it's misunderstood – a crystal ball kind of prediction of the future – but prophecy as the clear vision of the consequences of how we live our lives when we embrace thoughtless consumption of the earth's resources, when we choose revenge and violence over mercy and compassion, when we value our own comfort and sense of security over the welfare of our poorest and least powerful sisters and brothers.

The Spirit is also manifest here through the gifts of knowledge and wisdom, the knowledge and wisdom that come through long lives of love and service, but also the knowledge and wisdom that are born of great pain and loss.

Many of you also manifest the Spirit through the gifts of music, the art of writing, and the visual arts. To others in this congregation, the Spirit has given the gifts of hospitality of the heart and home, the gifts of healing laughter and healing touch, the gift of being able to discern and name the gifts of others. And even though I doubt many of you would use these words, the Spirit has also given some of you the gift of speaking in tongues, speaking in new ways about God, the Spirit, the cosmos, and what it is to be human.

And after only eight months as your minister, I also know that far too many of you doubt that you have any spiritual gifts at all, and far too many of you underestimate the value of the gifts you do recognize. And yet others among you believe you do have spiritual gifts to serve the common good, but you're not so sure you know what they are.

Take heart, my friends. Over the next several months and in a variety of ways, we as a congregation will be seeking to name and value your spiritual gifts – and to help you use them to serve the common good. Starting in February and throughout the season

of Lent, we'll have an opportunity to use the work of Joan Chittester, co-founder of the Network of Spiritual Progressive, to deepen our spiritual life and discover the gifts we are called to live fully and faithfully. In March, we'll hold a series of workshops on what we call "lay care." During these gatherings, we'll have opportunities to discover the particular gifts we have for caring for one another, whether it's help during a crisis, companionship at the end of life, or practical kinds of care like providing food and transportation. Beginning this spring, the Earth Stewards will be leading workshops and discussions that will help us discern who has the spiritual gifts of knowledge, wisdom, and exhortation to lead us as a church to live into our calling as faithful stewards of the earth. In the midst of all that, our Outreach Committee is and will be seeking to discern how the particular gifts and passions of this congregation can be used for the common good, not only through financial support, but, more importantly, with hands-on involvement, support, and relationship-building with our neighbors here in Sonoma and our neighbors around the world. And, who knows, we may even do what's called a "Spiritual Gifts Inventory" before the year is out.

If you're among the people who doubt you have any spiritual gifts, buckle your seatbelt, hold on to your hat, and join in the glorious and sometimes wild ride of discovering how you are already manifesting the Spirit. And if you're among the people who have started to wonder if you really have the gifts you've been assuming you have or have started to wonder how your gifts might serve the common good, buckle your seatbelt, hold on to your hat, and join in what may be a ride of discovery filled with surprises. But if you're among the people who think you're the most spiritually gifted person in the pew, in the sanctuary, in the town, or even in the state, well ... buckle your seatbelt, but don't bother to hold on to your hat, because once your head returns to its real size after being swelled up with delusions of spiritual grandeur, that hat ain't gonna fit no more.

But if you, like most folks I know, are a strange and beautiful combination of all three of these kinds of people, buckle your seatbelt and, with or without a hat, join this ride of discovery and challenge. Join the ride of discovering how the Spirit is seeking to manifest itself *in* you and how it is working for the common good *through* you.

Trust me, my beloved brothers and sisters – better yet, trust *God* – the Spirit does indeed choose to manifest itself *in* you, *with* you, and *through* you. The Spirit does not bless any *one* of you with *all* possible spiritual gifts, but the Spirit does bless *each* of you with the particular gifts that you and you alone can bring to a world that needs them.

I think you can tell that I don't think we have a whole lot in common with that iPhone I described at the beginning of this sermon. Please don't misunderstand me; I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the iPhone in particular or with technology in general. Like most human creations, it can be used in ways that harm, and it can be used in ways that heal. What I *am* saying is that it's a harmful mistake to think of ourselves as if we're the flesh and blood equivalent of an iPhone, people on whom we can keep loading more and more features and more and more expectations. We don't have to match the iPhone in being able to do and be everything in one small package. We don't have to match it by telling ourselves that we can and should have all possible spiritual

gifts. Instead, what we need to do, what God *invites us* to do, is simply embrace who we've been created to be and then trust that, by nurturing and using the particular spiritual gifts we've been given, we become people through whom God blesses and heals the world.

So let the Spirit manifest itself in you as it chooses, and you will find that you are participating in holy, healing work. You will find that the Spirit has been working in you and through you all along. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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