

**SLD09.10.06 24<sup>th</sup> Ordinary  
EPC  
I Corinthians 12:12-27  
Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“A Sofa With Holes”  
or  
“What’s God Up To Through You?”  
Gift-Oriented Ministry**

Okay, here’s the thing: I try to do well in all the important areas of my life. I try to be a good pastor and mom and housekeeper and gardener and friend. But what tends to happen is that I focus like mad on two or three of those areas, usually pastoring and parenting, until some third or fourth or fourteenth arena gets so loud or angry or ugly that I simply can’t put off my attention to it for another minute.

A couple weeks ago it was “ugly” that my living room sofa used to demand my attention.

Oh, I’d noticed for years that the fabric on the seats was beginning to wear. But I’d just turn the seat over to the more favorable side – you know how you do?

After a while, though, both sides of the seat had tears, so I just turned it to the least awful side. Eventually, however, both sides looked awful so I just covered the holes with a throw blanket. For about a year. Only people kept moving the throw to sit down and there were those nasty tears. I’d feel embarrassed, though not embarrassed enough to do anything about it.

It takes a lot of money to buy a new sofa. And a lot of planning and shopping around. And who has time? Or money? Anyway, I hate to shop (except at my thrift store.) So the holes on my sofa seat just got uglier and bigger until they became dangerous to dogs and small children.

Well, one Saturday a few weeks ago I was heading to Trinity Church for the Fall Leadership Conference and, for reasons I don't quite understand, could be subconscious, I always get lost when I drive to Trinity. So there I was, wandering around northwest Atlanta, already late for the conference, when I spied a sign for a yard sale. Now I'm a sucker for yard sales. Plus I felt so discouraged about not finding Trinity even though I had asked directions twice, I thought to myself, what the heck – I'm going to that yard sale.

Well, there was nothing at the sale that was of any interest to me except...you guessed it...this sofa that was sitting out on the lawn. It would do. It would more than do. It was actually not bad. And cheap. And immediately available.

So without really thinking about how on earth I was going to move that sofa to my house, never mind get it inside, I paid for it, shook hands, and went on to the conference. (I did eventually stumble upon Trinity.)

The next day after worship, with the sofa on my mind, I start canvassing people for a truck and some muscle, only it's last minute and nobody's available. And I start thinking, how stupid was I to buy this sofa? Then Tim Reeves, who's got to tend to Hayden's birthday party, says I'm free to borrow his mongo contractor's truck, so there's a start. And then Bob Atkinson – you know Bob – works all night, comes to worship anyway, sits in the back, doesn't say much, but when he does you ought to pay attention? Bob says, "I'll help you with that sofa."

Well, I've got meetings after church, and Bob's got to tend to his mom and eventually get some sleep so he can work that night. But one way or another we get back together that afternoon and drive Tim's truck over to northwest Atlanta. And

somehow, between us, we get that whole-lot-bigger-than-I-remembered-it sofa into the back of Tim's truck. We drive to my house and somehow get that two-ton sofa up the eight concrete steps to my front porch. I'm talking I got bruises on my arms and grime on my trousers and the devil keeps swearing from my mouth. And Bob's straining and sweating but not swearing yet (which I found impressive). And both of us are about to fall over from exhaustion. But by the hardest, we got that thing up on the porch. Okay. But the thing is, it won't fit through the front door.

Now me, I felt like crying. Or maybe, at that point, torching the sofa with me on it. But Bob, Bob's a problem-solver. He's good at figuring things out. Making things work. He calls himself a "prompter" and he's good at that, too. Like prompting the Riggs family to come to our Labor Day Retreat. But he's also a good problem-solver.

I like to think I'm a good problem-solver, too. But that day Bob saw things I couldn't see. Bob saw how, if we turned the sofa up on its side, and turned it to just such an angle, and mashed back its seats, and heaved at the same time, we just might be able to cram the damn thing through the opening of the door.

I couldn't see it. But I was tired and frustrated and open to suggestions. So we did what Bob thought would work, and I'm here to tell you it did work, and now I have a new – well, sort of new – sofa in my living room.

Now, I share that story (with Bob's permission) to illustrate "gift-oriented ministry" and I'll return to it. But first some other comments. Gift-oriented ministry is one of eight essential qualities of congregational health we began to think about last Sunday. These qualities of healthy churches are listed in your bulletin. Last Sunday I preached about the first essential quality - empowering leadership. We pondered the role of all

empowering leaders, which is to help members of a congregation find and express their unique gifts. We engaged the thinking of Christian Schwarz, the congregational researcher whose work has led to the idea of the eight essential qualities.<sup>1</sup> Schwarz says that empowering leaders don't hatch their own visions and then expect volunteers dutifully to do the work. Rather, leaders who empower others help members glimpse a vision of the vast and boundless and lovely ocean of God's Spirit, and then invite everyone to open themselves to whatever precious gifts God may be calling them to exercise.<sup>2</sup>

This morning we turn toward an examination of the shape and meaning of gift-oriented ministry. Schwarz believes such ministry is a superb example of the principle that guides all his thinking about congregations' growth and health, which is that if a congregation opens itself to become healthy, it will automatically grow, in every way—spiritually, psychologically, numerically, and more. This is because under God's care, congregations, like all healthy living things, can't help but grow. Schwarz adds that:

*The gift-oriented approach reflects the conviction that God sovereignly determines which Christians should best assume which ministries. The role of church leadership is to help its members to identify their gifts and to integrate them into appropriate ministries. When Christians serve in their area of giftedness, they generally function less in their own strength and more in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus ordinary people can accomplish the extraordinary.*

Now let's connect this with what Paul has to say about spiritual gifts in today's text. One of the points he makes is that through the Holy Spirit, we're all baptized into one body, and "made to drink of one Spirit." I hear Paul stressing that the source of our

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<sup>1</sup> Schwarz, Christian, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, Church Smart Resources, 1996 and 2006; and *Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development*, Schwarz and Christopher Schalk, Church Smart Resources, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> For this approach to the topic of gift-oriented ministry and much of the content of this sermon, I am indebted to the Rev. Michael A. King of Spring Mount Mennonite Church.

gifts, and the point of our gifts, in fact, the reason to be church in the first place, can be summarized with one phrase: the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent to keep his work and lessons and example alive and growing among those who seek to follow him. It's the Holy Spirit who binds us together as a body and invigorates what we do and guides and magnifies our efforts so they serve God's Kingdom.

So whatever we do that springs from and flows toward the vast and boundless ocean of God's Spirit, that helps us and our community to deepen and grow, we should keep doing that. But whatever doesn't spring from and flow toward the vast and boundless ocean of God's Spirit, then we need to quit doing that, whatever doesn't help us and our community to deepen and grow, well, we should cut that out. Forget it, drop it, stop it. Why waste our, or the Spirit's, time and energy?

Schwarz underscores this point when he says that congregations should simply cease Spirit-empty tasks that no longer bear fruit. This doesn't mean that such tasks were always wastes; they may once have been life-giving expressions of the Spirit that energized those working at them. But if they're only spirit-draining now, if nobody really wants to do them, if their time has passed, if one wearies of going through the motions of tasks that no longer give life, why, let's stop doing them.

Now, to say that, never mind preach it, makes me nervous.

Schwarz talks about different ways of thinking about the institution of the church. One way is called "technocratic." Technocrats tend to over-emphasize the significance of institutions and their programs, imagining that attending to a church's institutional needs will automatically yield life and flourishing in the church. As a military brat with an M.B.A., I've got me a technocratic bone or two. Which are the bones that make me

nervous when I talk about dropping whatever programs or traditions that no longer give life. I mean, what if everybody just goes home and swings in a hammock!

But then I remember who's doing the baptizing and the binding and the thirst-quenching, and it's not me or our programs or even the walls of this pretty church but the vast and boundless ocean of God's Holy Spirit. So you feel like going home and lying in a hammock, you just go on. Maybe that's what the Holy Spirit's telling you to do. That's what I need to learn to trust. But just keep your ears open for what the Holy Spirit says to you next, in your heart and through the lips of others.

Because that's a second point Paul makes in today's text, which is that because we're all joined together as members of one body, the business of who has which gifts isn't just an individual matter. We're all part of each other now. In fact, we're so closely linked that "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it."

So when you and I go about the business of figuring out what our gifts are and how we intend to exercise them in the body of Christ, we need to pay close attention not only to our personal take on our gifts, but how *others* regard and experience them as well.

Let me turn back to my sofa story. I don't know how Bob experienced that afternoon, whether it was all drudgery and duty or excitement and fulfillment. But I *can* testify to the life his gift of time and energy had the power to give me. This pastor now sits in her living room on her snappy, almost-new sofa feeling grateful and peaceful and hardly ever embarrassed. But more important that the pleasure of a new sofa, Bob's help and resourcefulness that afternoon gave me a sense of being held, not only by his

friendship but by this body of Christ called Emory Presbyterian Church.

I felt deeply ministered to by Bob's efforts, which, in turn, fed the energy I have to minister to others. Which is how the Spirit works, multiplying and magnifying the gifts we to offer one another. That's how the Spirit grows the body of Christ, too, when our gifts overflow to embrace not only those whom the Spirit draws to us, but those to whom we are drawn outside of ourselves.

Today's text stresses that even though there's just one Spirit, there are countless gifts, all equally essential contributions to the body of Christ. Through the workings of the vast and boundless ocean of God's Spirit "ordinary people can accomplish the extraordinary." We tend to stereotype a few church offices, like preacher, teacher, elder, choral director, as the only areas of important service. Many of us have no interest in such roles because we sense there isn't our gift—though let no one whose gift truly is among these resist the call!

But what if we open our minds, wide, wide, wider yet, to whatever gifts God has given each one of us? What if we think out of the old boxes, starting from scratch to ask who loves to do what and what that love could do for another? Then ordinary people become extraordinary, because what makes a person extraordinary is not doing the same old things we've predetermined are important. What makes ordinary people extraordinary is when, by being true to who we are and the gifts God has given us, we allow ourselves to be filled with the power and the joy and the opportunity to offer just the right expertise at just the right moment, which in some cases is to move old sofas for the preacher.

I'm telling you all, this Natural Church Development thing is messing with me.

Sometimes the complexities of its theoretical underpinnings make my eyes cross. Other times I think, “oh yeah, that’s how I want to live my life. *That’s* how I want us to be church together. Paying attention to our spiritual gifts and offering them to one another and our community in ways that please God and build us up. Choosing things to do, and ways to be, that feel natural, that feel true, that align with who we are and how God’s calling us to grow. *That’s* what I want.”

But then my inner technocrat gets fussy and I start fretting about whether enough people will agree to be elders. Or who will help Debbie with the Junior High Sunday School class? Or how long, O Lord, will we have a deficit budget? Or, Lord have mercy, did I really agree NOT to have a Session meeting in December?!!

So regarding this business of gift-oriented ministry, as in all things, I go back and forth, back and forth, between faith and doubt, confidence and anxiety, trust and fear. But then I remember my “new” sofa, and the vast and boundless ocean of God’s Spirit.

To the glory of God. Amen.