

“Many Gifts, One Spirit”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on January 20, 2019

In the early 1800s, in her mid-twenties, Jarena Lee first heard the call to preach the gospel. She was a black woman born to free but poor black parents in New Jersey. When Lee sought permission from Reverend Richard Allen of the African Methodist Episcopal church to preach, he denied her request, upholding the church’s ban on women preachers.

Years later, Jarena attended a worship service where the preacher seemed to lose his words and appeared unable to continue. Spontaneously she sprung to her feet, moved by what she called a “supernatural impulse,” took over the preaching, and finished the sermon. She writes in her autobiography, “I now sat down, scarcely knowing what I had done, being frightened. I imagined, that for this indecorum, as I feared it might be called, I should be expelled from the church. But instead of this, the Bishop [Allen] rose up in the assembly, and related that I had called upon him eight years before, asking to be permitted to preach, and that he had put me off; but that now he as much believed that I was called to that work, as any of the preachers present.” And thus Jarena Lee became the first woman authorized to preach in the A.M.E. tradition in 1819. She served as an itinerant preacher, speaking to black and white audiences. In one year alone she preached one hundred and seventy-eight sermons.

The Spirit gifts and calls whomever the Spirit gifts and calls and woe to anyone who stands between the Spirit and the person Spirit calls!

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul is clear that the Spirit manifests itself in many ways among the many people of the church, and you might wonder why he felt the need to carry on so much about it. Shouldn’t it have been obvious to the Corinthians that God had gifted them all but in different ways? Did it really need to be said? Or was something in the way, preventing all the gifts from being recognized and welcomed?

One clue about what was going on in Corinth can be found in the previous chapter, chapter 11. First it should be noted that Corinth was a city greatly divided by wealth—the haves and the have-nots—and the church in Corinth was no different. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul outright scolds the church for its inequitable observation of the Lord’s Supper. In those days the Lord’s Supper was an entire meal shared among the community of believers, much like the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples. But in the Corinthian church, some habits had developed that did not reflect the Jesus way. Apparently the wealthy were arriving early to the meal, feasting on the choicest of foods and getting drunk on the wine. Meanwhile the poor in the community were arriving later, probably due to the fact that they had work to attend to before they could come, and by the time they arrived, there was scarcely any food left. Paul is harsh in his indictment of this grossly inequitable practice, saying, “I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good” (1 Corinthians 11:17). He even says that when they come together it is NOT the Lord’s Supper they eat because “one person goes hungry while another gets drunk” (1

Corinthians 11:20-21). He asks, “Do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? (1 Corinthians 11:22).

This Lord’s Supper business is the backdrop to chapter twelve, and so you wonder: were poor people being denied certain gifts of the Spirit, that is, shut out from using them? Or was it that certain gifts—perhaps those gifts more readily apparent in the wealthy, let’s say the gift of tithing or hospitality—were given special status? Perhaps the gifts of the educated were more highly revered than the gifts of the less educated, or maybe it was simply assumed that the less educated could not possess such gifts as knowledge and wisdom.

When I was growing up in church, we were often given “spiritual gift inventories”—little tests you could take to determine what gifts you actually had so you would know to be using them to Christ’s service! I don’t think discerning what your distinct gifts are and deciding to use them in service to the church is a bad idea. Please, by all means, share your gift! But I suspect Paul’s point here may be more about welcoming the gifts of others, no matter who they are or what their gift. In other words, Church, make room for everybody and every gift. And if you consider yourself one of the impoverished members of a community, Paul wants you to know you have been given gifts and your gifts do matter. If you think you are more indispensable to the church than some others . . . well, you don’t understand how the Spirit works.

I’m no more important than anyone else because I have the job of preaching and the guy who teaches Sunday School is no more important than the guy who cooks meals for the sick. The woman who sings beautifully is not more important than the woman who prays fervently and visa versa. All the gifts matter. All the gifts are to be celebrated, and any gift can belong to any person, no matter how unlikely.

I imagine no one guessed that the shy, painfully timid girl with the small squeaky voice in a Southern Baptist church would grow up to be a preacher and some people even flat out told me I couldn’t possibly be hearing a call from God in that vein. But Paul would say, never underestimate the Spirit and do not squeeze God into a box.

I love how Jarena Lee said it in her autobiography in 1849:

I now told [Reverend Allen] that the Lord had revealed it to me, that I must preach the gospel . . . He said that our Discipline . . . did not call for women preachers. This I was glad to hear, because it removed the fear of the cross - but no sooner did this feeling cross my mind, than I found that a love of souls had in a measure departed from me; that holy energy which burned within me, as a fire, began to be smothered. This I soon perceived.

O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life. For as unseemly as it may appear now-a-days for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God. And why should it be thought impossible, heterodox, or improper for a woman to preach? seeing the Saviour died for the woman as well as for the man.

If the man may preach, because the Saviour died for him, why not the woman? seeing he died for

her also. Is he not a whole Saviour, instead of a half one? as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear.

Did not Mary first preach the risen Saviour, and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity - hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel?

Of course, at Lake Shore, we've moved beyond the question of whether women can preach. Jarena Lee's story is relevant for us only if we are willing to ask ourselves, who in *our* context have we shoved to the outskirts? Whose gifts have we overlooked? Who is the Jarena Lee is our midst today, sitting near you in a pew but you haven't seen her yet, recognized her yet? If you're a Reverend Allen in this story, are you denying people permission to do their best work or are you blessing them and releasing them without even attempting to micromanage?

I had a friend in San Antonio, a middle-aged woman who used to paint beautiful little permission slips for her friends, because sometimes adults need to hear that they have permission. Permission to take that risk, to do that thing, try that idea. Sue Monk Kidd says every woman needs a permission-giver in her life. What if the church were in the business of handing out permission slips, liberally? *You want to start a new mission? **Go for it.** You feel called to do a new thing? **We believe you.** You want to start a new ministry in the church? **We've got your back.** You have a vision but it's going to cost money? **How can we help you raise the funds?** You have an idea but it would change the way we're used to things around here? **Way to go, Sport.** You have a gift to bring to the table but you don't do it the same way as the person before you did? **How refreshing! We celebrate variety.** You're new here and you already have opinions? **Thumbs up! Thank you for adding your voice. Welcome to the family.***

Imagine if the church were a welcoming sort of place where each person's unique gifts and personality were celebrated and embraced. Imagine if the church were a place where you could blossom and so could your neighbor. Imagine if the church were a place where the Spirit was poured out on all God's people, no one was left untouched, and no one was ever told, "But it's never been done that way before." Imagine if the church were a place where the Spirit had free reign, where people were more important than policy, where the gifts of the Spirit were plentiful and unrestricted. By the grace of God may we be such a church, today and always. Amen.