

31 August 2014

Horrid Little Inventories

Romans 12:1-8

I actually want to start with the second half of this reading – the bit about our spiritual gifts. This is one of the three places in the New Testament where Paul stresses that we all have different gifts and so must all work together, forming from these distinct parts a unified body. The gifts listed in the other two places – 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 – are a little different from this list, but by putting all three passages together, you can still compile a master list of all the New Testament Spiritual Gifts, sort them into categories, and then – using one of dozens of written or online testing instruments – take a quiz to determine within the statistical range of error which gifts we have, and in this way discover which part of the Body of Christ we are. Are you a prophecy part, a teaching part, a mercy part, or what? Maybe you’ve done this. It isn’t quite as big these days, but in the 70s and 80s you couldn’t throw a stone in church without knocking over a stack of spiritual gift assessments and making a mess that would have to be cleaned up by somebody with the gift of service. Many people have found these spiritual gift tests to be helpful. If you took one, I hope it was helpful to you. Me? I really hate those things.

Oh, I understand their appeal. I really do. Taking a test that’s about me is always fun. We all like talking about ourselves. It’s our favorite subject. And taking quizzes about what makes us special – that’s fascinating. How else do you explain the popularity of facebook personality quizzes: “Which famous internet cat are you? Take this test and find out!” (I was Grumpy Cat). “Which Disney princess are you?” (I didn’t take that one). Here’s one I took: “Which church denomination is right for you?” (Pentecostal). But not all personality tests are silly. There are a lot of legit, useful personality inventories that we take: the Myers-Briggs, the Enneagram, DISC analysis. Then you have the specialized ones: the Howard Gardner Learning Intelligences test, vocational aptitude tests, Conflict Management Profiles The list goes on and on, and as I said, these can be useful. They can provide direction in a world of chaotically confusing choices, can help explain why we fit better in some contexts than in others, and can give us insights into relating to people who are different from us. Again, there’s nothing wrong with taking these tests, and that includes spiritual gift inventories.

So why do I hate them? Well, there are also couple of significant dangers. First of all, any time we divide human beings into separate groups – whether we do so by race, color, personality type, or spiritual gifts – we inevitably go the next step and start comparing our group with others’. Then we generally conclude that our group is best and those other people are just *weird*. Every legitimate testing instrument warns against this: “Remember, no profile is *better* than any other; they all simply record differences.” But it doesn’t matter; we do it anyway. Something inside us needs to affirm that we’re good. The easiest way to do that is to look down on someone else, and these instruments give us tools by which to do both. When I started seminary in 1986, the big test was the Myers-Briggs Inventory, and we all took it our first week on campus. Then, of course, we compared our results. One young lady asked me my profile. I said, “I’m an INTJ.” She stared at me in horror. “INTJ? Eww!” And yes, we do that with spiritual gifts, too. We’ve done it from the beginning. Where Paul talks about gifts in 1 Corinthians, he spends most of his time telling the church, “Just because you have the gift of tongues does *not* make you more spiritual than anyone else. *All* the gifts are from the Spirit, all right?”

So, first, there’s the danger of creating divisions. But there’s a more insidious danger to separating ourselves by gifts. Once we have pigeonholed ourselves in this group or that, we get comfortable there. Once we identify ourselves as this one thing, that provides an easy excuse not to try to become anything else. How many have read the recent Young Adult novel *Divergent*? (Really? Everyone should keep up with Young Adult literature. How else will you learn to identify teenage vampires?) Well, briefly, the novel *Divergent* imagines a post-apocalyptic world where people are separated into five different personality-based “factions.” Children take qualifying exams at a certain age to determine which will be their faction for the rest of their lives. Some are Erudite, and they’re put in charge of research; some are Dauntless and assigned to defense; still other are in the Abnegation (that is, the self-sacrificing) faction and are put in charge of government, and so on. Sounds

reasonable, right? But as time passes the factions grow apart, grow suspicious of each other, and eventually go to war. Most interesting of all, all the factions regard anyone who has more than one gift as dangerous. These are the Divergent. The allegory's a little heavy-handed, sure, but it's not nonsense. We really do tend to find our comfort zone within our area of giftedness and then turn our backs on everything else.

It happens with spiritual gifts, too. Here, too, we tend to identify one strength and act as if we can ignore everything else. About fifteen years ago I went to a Church Leadership conference led by a national guru in that field. He was talking about the importance of getting churchmembers assigned to roles based on their gifts and skills. At one point, he said, "Do you have some old guy in a bad suit and halitosis who's been a greeter at your church for fifty years? I don't care how long he's been there; he's not helping you. Get rid of him. Give him a job in the basement making sure the pilot light stays lit." Then he grinned at the crowd and said, "As you can see, I don't have the gift of mercy." Now, I don't see that statement as a sign that he doesn't have the gift of mercy; I see it as a sign that he's kind of a jerk. And here's the thing: not-being-a-jerk is not one of the New Testament spiritual gifts, something that some people have and some don't. Not-being-a-jerk is part of the baseline; it's a basic expectation for everyone who claims to represent Christ. This leadership guru may not have the particular gift of mercy, but that does not give him a pass on being as caring as he knows how.

And that brings us (finally) to the beginning of our passage, verses 1-2: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and whole.* What are we to give to God? Our whole selves, our lives. We are to be a living sacrifice. Not just our good parts, our gifts: everything. And what will be the result of this sacrifice? We will be transformed utterly, renewed from top to bottom.

I think it's tremendously important that before talking about how we all have different gifts which constitute different parts of one body, Paul stresses that *all* our parts – our gifts, our weaknesses, and everything in between – should be laid on the altar. That's a living sacrifice to God. In fact, I'll go a step farther and say that offering our weaknesses matters more. When we bring to God only what we do well, it can feel as if we're blessing lucky God with some of our giftedness. When we offer our weaknesses and plunge in over our heads and beyond our abilities, that's when God does the best work. There's a reason God chose Moses the stutterer to be prophet and spokesman for God's people. There's a reason God chose the closed-minded sectarian Pharisee Saul of Tarsus to be the Apostle to the Foreigners. God is *way* less interested in how gifted we are than in what we are willing to lay without restraint on the altar.

So, once again, there's nothing wrong with discovering and naming your gifts, and if taking a horrid little inventory helps with that, great. But there's a prior step, which is absolutely essential: giving your wholeness to God. We're about to enter the time when we recruit leaders for 2015, and at this season we usually ask the question: What are your gifts and talents, and how can you use them for the church? But I don't want to ask that today. Instead I want to ask this: What are your weaknesses? What are your anxieties? What scares you to death? Is it public speaking? Being around sick people? Working with teenagers? Meeting new people? Talking about your faith in public?

Now, how can you give that weakness to God? That's how we become a living sacrifice – good and acceptable and *whole*.

A final word:

So, if you were keeping score, I'm a Grumpy Cat, Pentecostal, INTJ. And I'm sure if I had taken the Disney princess test, I'd be Belle. But you know what's more important than all that? Those times – and they are all too rare – when I do what isn't natural for me. When I put down my books, leave the computer, and go out and have coffee with someone I don't know and hear their story. That's harder for me, but that's when I know I'm doing ministry. Do something this week outside your giftedness. Know that God will be with you.

p.s. I just took the quiz. I am, in fact, Belle.