

Exodus 1:8—2:10, Psalm 124, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

“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 . . . We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence, the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”

Today in St. Paul’s letter to the Romans we have a beautiful passage, one of several similar passages, about the gifts of the Church – how we are united to each other by gifts that we share and also how we need each other and how some people’s gifts supplement other’s weaknesses. And Paul gives a lovely list of some of these gifts – teaching, serving, encouragement or exhortation, generosity. All beautiful virtuous things.

But I think if we’re really honest with each other here, we would have to admit that sometimes it’s hard to stay focused when Paul makes these lists of virtues. And this is not the easiest of St. Paul’s lists to stay focused on. When he describes the gift of ministry as coming from the grace for ministering, or the teacher being gifted with the grace of teaching, it’s possible some of us might start to drift.

But, actually, this list always catches me again at the last moment. It’s that final pairing that startles me. The gift that makes a good teacher is teaching. But the gift of the compassionate? *Cheerfulness*.

Cheerfulness? This pairing has always caught me because the connection seems to be missing here. It makes sense that it’s good or helpful for a compassionate person to be cheerful, but it never struck me as necessary, and certainly not as the defining characteristic of a compassionate person. Why cheerfulness?

I decided to do some research about this word – which in Greek, if you’re interested, is *ἡλαρότης*. The word does, in fact, mean cheerfulness or joyfulness. It also, according to the first Greek Lexicon I looked at, means “readiness of mind”. Though honestly, when I read that I wasn’t entirely sure what *that* meant.

So I kept looking, and I found that there is another main meaning to this word. If you have this disposition, you are cheerful, joyful, and “prompt to do anything”. And it was that last phrase that finally made this connection click for me.

I find this word makes a really interesting connection between cheerfulness – joy – and being prompt to act. It speaks of a particular disposition of the heart – a cheerful internal readiness to respond to someone else. In this passage from Romans that response, that action, is showing compassion – or showing mercy. And so this internal disposition of joyful readiness to act is always directed towards another.

It’s *love*. It’s taking delight in another person. It’s putting the other person first, before your own self-interest. And this brings a kind of freedom, this joy that comes from focusing on others before ourselves, that feels no hesitation in responding with compassion or mercy. This disposition includes no stopping to wonder if you have time, or thinking “Ah, another task to do.” It’s just this readiness for an instant response of love that comes naturally out of you.

And it seems to me that this should be the perpetual disposition of a Christian. Always ready to respond in love. Always attentive to the needs of others. Always responsive to the pains of this world.

And responding with a joy that arises from our love for others. The image that comes to me is the one used by Jesus with the woman at the well a few Sundays ago of a “spring of water *gushing up* to eternal life.” We could find in ourselves this gushing well of joy and love from God that’s constantly ready to spill out in word and action.

Most times the promptings of God – the voice of God calling us to serve and to love – doesn't come like a flash of lightning from the sky summoning us to some action. Many times the voice of God is a sudden and subtle impulse where you don't necessarily even know where it comes from. You see someone in need and you just think "I will help."

I think a common example is when you find yourself with someone who is hurting and you realize they need physical contact. They need a hug, or they need someone to hold their hand, and you just respond – not wondering, "Oh should I do this?" but simply reaching out, without hesitation. And often the most beautiful and holy of these moments happen without really any conscious thought – you are simply attentive and focused outward toward the other person and you respond in love.

This is one of the ways that we feel presence of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps in these moments you may even feel like the Holy Spirit is carrying you along. That you are acting because the love of God is actually flowing through you, flowing out from you. That you're actually caught up in the midst of God showing love to His people.

Now it's important to remember that not every impulse we have is from the Holy Spirit. We can say and do a lot of things impulsively or reactively that are not focused on love or concern for another. And that's a main way we can recognize what is not a prompting of the Holy Spirit – when we act from selfishness or fear or any motive that is focused primarily on our own self-interest.

But this unselfish, joyful readiness to love is a really remarkable mark of a Christian. And I think a great example of a person who has this sort of disposition – this readiness of mind and heart - readiness to respond to the love and the promptings of God - is St. Peter.

We have a great example of this in today's Gospel story. Imagine the scene of this story. Jesus has come back from the region of Tyre and Sidon, and the crowds are growing, and everyone has a theory about who this Jesus character is. And Jesus is doing some information gathering, and he asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And I imagine the disciples thinking, "Oh! Good! We can answer this question!" And they say how people think Jesus might be John the Baptist returned from the dead, or even Elijah, or Jeremiah, or another famous Old Testament prophet returned to life.

And then Jesus asks a second question: "But who do *you* say that I am?" And I imagine that now the disciples are thinking, "Oooh, I hope he calls on someone else." Kind of looking at the floor because the teacher has asked the hard question and you don't want to answer wrong.

Or at least, it would have been that way. But instead, the impression I get from the gospel story is that there's *no* awkward pause, because Peter just *speaks*. Sometimes people accuse Peter of being impulsive, or blurting things out – think of his jumping out of a boat to walk on water with Jesus 2 Sundays ago. But I think his behavior is actually a sign of this constant promptness to act, this joyful readiness of mind and heart that Peter has.

Peter responds without even hesitating. Jesus says "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Messiah." It just comes out of him. This thought may have been in his heart before, or he may never have quite formed it into words before, and yet suddenly out come these words.

And I think we all have moments like that. And again I think that Peter may have felt in that moment that he was just being carried along. The words came out of him as he spoke out of his love for Jesus. Or maybe they simply came through him but their source was in the Spirit of God that was present with him and he was just ready to speak – "You are the Messiah." Jesus recognizes these words as being given to Peter by the Father.

This disposition, this joyful openness to the promptings of God – of the Holy Spirit – is something that we as Christians can cultivate in our hearts. And in Peter's case we can see how he was looking toward God, his thoughts were so focused on Jesus and who Jesus was that he wasn't worrying about how he would look, or if

others would think he was showing off, or if he would embarrass himself. These words just came out of him, naturally, because his heart was pointed outside himself.

And I think this is in a real way the call of the Christian Church, that this is the defining characteristic of a Christian. That as a Christian, as someone who has heard the voice of Jesus calling you to love God and love your neighbor, you focus your heart and your mind outward, towards the other. Towards the people in need, towards our Lord.

And because of the gift of the Holy Spirit we receive at baptism, and because of the possibility of having this internal disposition, love and passion and excitement could just come through us. We've already received so much love from God that it could be this bubbling well inside us. There is a presence of God inside of us now that is ready to spill out of us – and this can come out in our words, or it can come out in our actions as ready responses of compassion. This could be the defining way that the Church is.

I think this would most often happen in our personal lives in acts of compassion for the people around us – at home, at church, at work, or at school. When we encounter someone in pain, or unhappy, or in a nasty mood and we respond with concern and love and even joy instead of irritation or resentment. But this disposition would also manifest in loving responses to the hurts and violence and needs of the wider world which are brought daily before our eyes.

Instead of being totally preoccupied with our own stress and busyness and feeling like things are too much trouble, we could keep returning to finding that internal disposition that is less focused on our own issues and worries and more lovingly and joyfully attentive to the concerns of others because we take delight in others. And I wonder, if we as Christians really sought to live into that and saw it as defining who we are, how it might change the world.