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Sweat Is Implied

Text: I Corinthians 12:1-11

In his great work of moral philosophy, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle enumerates and describes the human excellences toward which we ought to strive, and of which we are capable. The list includes the cardinal virtues of courage, practical wisdom, temperance, and justice. These are virtues we all recognize. He also lists a number of virtues peculiar to his time and culture that we have a hard time recognizing. Often we do not even have a suitable word by which to translate them. One of these is the virtue of *megalopsuchia*. The best we can come up with is a literal translation that calls this virtue “great-souledness.” It is also often translated as “pride” which has a certain degree of accuracy, but which to our ears fails to capture the sense that Aristotle had this was an excellence. Officially, we are of a different mind about pride.

Great-souledness is the virtue of the man who has pretty much everything. Having everything, the ancients reasoned that he ought to be proud of his acquisitions and of all his accomplishments. Thus the opposing *vice* to this virtue is mock humility, the sort of attitude that says, “aw shucks, it wasn’t anything.” No, the ancients maintained, if you had it, you were to be proud of it; you needed to show it. Certain obligations were implied in this pride. The man who was great-souled was magnificent. He gave gifts, he gave favors, he had proteges. His accomplishments were to be shared in the city. Thus the great man should be a proud man, a man of superior accomplishments with an attitude to go along with them. He would never see himself as common or like anybody else, because he wasn’t.

Since the advent of Christianity, the virtue of great-souledness, or pride, has fallen into

disfavor. We even call it a sin, or in Augustine's description of many ancient pagan virtues, "a splendid vice." Given the example of our Lord who humbled himself, we do not see it as a virtue when one struts his stuff too loudly. We usually encourage people to take something like the "aw shucks" attitude to their accomplishments. We usually encourage people to think of the talents that produce superior accomplishments as gifts, things that we are not responsible for and that have been given to us out of the blue. Thus children who are exceptionally bright get put in the "talented and gifted" section of the class, not "the superior children" section. Similarly, people who have musical talent are called gifted, not gods.

It is also utterly consistent with this penchant to talk about talents as gifts that when these gifts bloom into accomplishments that win awards, that their humble recipients usually want to give thanks to their maker for making this possible. Thus we have the spectacle of wide receivers pointing to the sky after scoring a touchdown and making the free safety look like a fool; honoree after honoree at the Country Music Awards fills his or her acceptance speech with a tribute to Jesus for making this award possible. The sole exception to such thanksgiving for gifts has been the foul mouthed and consciously offensive comedienne, Kathy Griffin, who last year, when given an award for some unfathomable reason, made a point to say explicitly that Jesus had nothing to do with it. While there were cries of "blasphemy!" all around her, for my part I suspect that Jesus was deeply relieved to be off the hook for that one.

But let us leave these excesses aside. It *is* appropriate to give thanks for what might be called natural gifts in the same way as it is appropriate to give thanks to God at each meal for our daily bread. They are gifts of the creation, and we owe thanks and gratitude to our Creator. But not only do we owe God verbal thanks, we owe the thanks that comes in faithfulness, that comes in using these gifts in such a way that we take into consideration the purposes of the Creator as

well as our purposes. Thus it is very meet, right and our bounden duty to use our talents not only for the sustenance and enrichment of our lives, but also for the betterment of the lives of others. It is appropriate for a composer such as Johann Sebastian Bach to write at the end of each composition the initials “SDG” – “sola Deo gloria” – “glory to God alone.” It is appropriate for an accountant to use her skills to be the church’s treasurer, and for a skilled craftsman to volunteer time to Habitat for Humanity and a lawyer to do pro bono work . Natural gifts, if we acknowledge the creator, are gifts to be shared. Pagan virtues such as pride or great-souledness are not Christian virtues.

Yet, it is necessary to recognize that the gifts we are talking about are *natural* gifts, gifts of the creation, as it were, and they are *not* the same thing as gifts of the Spirit that Paul talks about. They are gifts that come with our creation, and are gifts that are to be used appropriately within creation. They are not cause for arrogance. Still, these are not the gifts needed to advance the kingdom, although they might in some ways be pressed into the kingdom’s service.

What is the difference here?

Well, gifts of the creation, talents as it were, are natural and they come with our creation. John may have natural talent for music, and once somebody puts an instrument in his hands, he will play it well. With practice and teaching, he will play it better than anybody. Tiger may well work very hard to be a great golfer, but the difference between him and me is never going to be the number of golf balls we hit each day. Just ask Phil Mickelson. In this respect, these gifts are given quite unequally. We would like to even them out, and we try to honor *all* natural gifts. For example, we now claim that there are several different kinds of intelligence, and “book smarts” is not the only kind of intelligence there is. Thus given the numerous ways of being smart, more people can be considered smart. But now matter how widely we cast our net, some people are

still going to have exceptional talents, some people will have fair to middling ones, and some people will, quite honestly, have no discernible talents, whatsoever. There is nothing to be done for it. That is simply the way it is with natural gifts.

For this reason, even if they are used generously, natural gifts like everything else in nature are limited resources. We have them and others don't. We can share their benefits if we choose, but we don't have to, and we can't give the talent itself to others. Furthermore, like all limited resources which are set out in random order in the creation, natural gifts can therefore breed competitiveness, resentment, and invite jealousy. Other people want them, they may even think they deserve them. The hardworking Salieri thought he deserved the gifts of the frivolous Mozart. Yet, these gifts seem utterly random, and moral virtue has nothing to do with their distribution. Tiger may be a moral monster, but he is still going to win. As our Lord himself noted of things in the creation, the rain falls on the just and the unjust; natural evils such as disease and genetic weaknesses fall on the just and the unjust, and natural gifts fall randomly, too, on the just and unjust, and they fall in such a way that some people get an abundance of them and others get very little. Randomness *is* the fairness of nature.

It is different with the gifts of the Spirit. How?

Well, in the first place, consider what St. Paul tells us about spiritual gifts. There are, indeed, a variety of gifts of the Spirit just as there are a variety of natural gifts. Some people are given the utterance of wisdom, and others are given the utterance of knowledge, to others the gifts of healing, and to others the discernment of spirits. Some are called to be apostles, some are called to be ministers, some are called to be elders, and some to be deacons. But, Paul makes very clear that all of these gifts, which are given by the same Spirit, are given for the common good. They are not given to distinguish between grades of believers, and they are not to be used

to grade Christians, even if these gifts sometimes seem rare. They are not meant to create a social hierarchy. They are given purely and simply for a common good, which is life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Whereas natural goods are limited, and breed competitiveness, spiritual goods, even if rare, on the other hand are only spiritual goods insofar as they work to breed unity and a common life in God. That is how you can tell what they are. They are good only for upbuilding others, and if used for any other purpose, they can become demonic. Our Lord pointed out that you can tell a tree by its fruit. Assuming such reasoning, one may therefore very well conclude that it is a spiritual gift if, and only if the gift is meant to benefit others; it is a limited and natural gift if the first benefit goes to oneself, and only secondarily does it benefit another.

So while there are several different specific gifts of the Spirit, they all have a common life-giving quality. That quality is, in short, service, or the gift of the ability to give oneself. The gift of being a leader in a Christian community, whether one is a minister, elder or deacon, is the gift of giving of oneself for the life of the community, nothing more and nothing less. It is a passion for the good of the community above all else, even if it means some hardship on the part of the one who has the gift. In fact, it usually does mean some hardship, since people with spiritual gifts have the gift of giving themselves. What they give is not just what is left over after taking care of themselves and their friends.

Some years ago, I served on the Candidates' Committee for the presbytery of which I was a member. When potential candidates came forward, we always asked them why they thought they were called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Most of the time, having been trained in the secular world on how to handle interviews, they would list their strengths. They might mention, for example, that they were good communicators; this would make them good preachers, and therefore good assets for the church. But it was never any of those things, which

are strictly natural gifts, that interested us and made us decide that a person had a call. Rather, it was ultimately their concern for the life of the church that made the difference, a concern that manifested itself in a sense of service that, whether they recognized it at the time or not, overrode all of their other interests. The guy who wanted to do youth work because the youth group had been so helpful to him didn't qualify, because he was trying to relive his own adolescence over and over again. The woman, however, who without coaching or seminary saw the church as a gift of grace, and who wanted above all to serve communion did. To reach that goal, she would be willing to go to great lengths.

Here is the other difference between natural gifts and gifts of the Spirit. Whereas natural talents, natural gifts, are things that by and large make our lives easier and increase our worldly well being, even if we work hard to cultivate them and even if we do give some of their benefits away, spiritual gifts are quite different. People can become jealous of natural gifts and even resentful of their distribution because they would like to get the personal benefits of talent. But it is not that way at all with spiritual gifts. With spiritual gifts, the benefit is first to others, and then to us – or rather the benefit to us is being the sort of person who thinks of others first. With spiritual gifts, we give and are challenged to give. Indeed, as St. John Chrysostom once pointed out, in the case of spiritual gifts, labor and sweat are implied. That may be why it seems that these gifts are so rarely seen; a lot of people don't want them. The gift of giving of yourself is not easy; it takes real work. Thus spiritual gifts do not necessarily make one's life easier at all, at least in a certain sense. They make it a lot harder, because caring for others requires a lot more work than just caring for yourself. That is why people wish they had certain natural gifts, but are rarely caught scrambling for spiritual gifts, at least real spiritual gifts, and not their new age counterfeits.

Yet, whether looked for or not, God continues to give out spiritual gifts for the common good. And there are men and women who have accepted them, even with all the sweat that they imply. There are those like St. Paul who in accepting a call never rested in his travels to proclaim the gospel, learning in his flesh what Christ had said about the foxes having their holes, and the birds their nests, but that the Son of Man had no place to rest his head. There are those who like Albert Schweitzer, and any number of other medical missionaries, gave up lucrative careers and worked for the welfare of others. And there are those such as the deacons and elders we are ordaining and installing this morning.

You are not being ordained because of your natural gifts, although many of you have great natural gifts. You are being ordained so that God may give you the gift of service, and that by your service God may continue to give gifts to the church. In giving you that gift, understand that sweat is implied. But what else is implied is that in the end you will be found in the image of our Lord, who gave everything of himself so that others might live. Accept that gift, and in your example, let all who are here learn also to aspire to the higher gifts. For in that gift of service is a good that comes to everybody.