

“Unpack Your Spiritual Gifts”

Romans 12:1-8

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Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

I read an article about Americans' participation in the life of community. According to that article, if you go to a grocery store like Bel Air or Raley's, roughly sixty percent of people you meet there do not currently belong to any community. Doesn't that seem surprising? In a sense, we live in a lonely world where people are not connected very well, where people are spiritually isolated like an island, but where people are still hungry for community. Another report shows that more than seventy million people are using the internet's social network services like Facebook or Twitter as another concept of community. Human beings cannot live without relationships. I believe that you are blessed because you belong to this wonderful community where people are connected one another and care for each other like a big family. Not every community has this warm atmosphere. This is a blessing to you. This morning, I would like to talk about the church: What is the purpose and mission of the church? I hope that we can find some inspirational thoughts for our church in our reading of the Apostle Paul's letter to a church in Rome.

Our family finally moved into the parsonage this week on Monday. Obviously moving is a stressful event, especially as the process begins with finding moving boxes, packing our stuff into the boxes and finally, the most challenging thing: unpacking all the boxes and putting them back in order. Our house still looks like a refugee place after World War II. There are many unpacked moving boxes spread out over the house from the kitchen to each room. I guess that it might take a while to completely clean up all the boxes. Tuesday morning, I asked my wife, "Where are my socks and hair gel?" In a minute, I realized that I had asked the wrong question to the wrong person. She stared at me and answered, "Either you have to be patient for couple days or you can go open up boxes to find it." I had to buy a new hair gel for today. I have talked to some of church members this week about moving boxes; I felt much relieved that some of them still keep a couple of unpacked moving boxes in their garage even though they moved out thirty years ago. It is always good to hear validation from others!

I must say this to you. Even though moving is not a fun event, our family is excited to join this Fair Oaks United Methodist Church community. We were so touched by your caring and warm hospitality that you have shown us during the last couple weeks in our transition. Even this Monday afternoon when we moved into the parsonage and when we realized that there were no utensils and pans to prepare meals, several people came by and gave us food to eat, and a couple of handy men came and helped to hook up our washer, dryer and refrigerator for our convenience. It exceeded our expectations. We know that the church was obligated to do show these hospitable acts, but you went extra miles by thinking of us, and you showed us your caring hearts in your actions. It was a great example of what church should look like for each of us and to our world! I feel like I am very blessed to be a part of this wonderful community as your pastor.

While I was unpacking moving boxes Monday, I also found your housewarming gifts for us. Thank you so much. For a second, I reflected about myself as a gift to our church. What if I can make my new appointment to this church a gift of some kind? What gifts I can share with you? This thought made me humble before you and my God. My calling is to serve you as your pastor, doing pastoral care and visits to the sick, preaching the words of God and helping you to find hope even though life is hard. As we share our time together, I will unpack my gifts for you. (It may take a while like the moving boxes in my house.) My gift for you is that I will serve this church, the body of Christ, with my heart, mind and strength. What I hope for this new journey with you is this, as the book of Micah 6:8 reminds us of God's requirements for us: I want "to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God" in life together.

The Church is built and established based on God's sacrificial act of love for the world. The reason why the Church exists is simple but powerful: God sent His son, Jesus Christ to the world. Jesus Christ proved God's unconditional love through his suffering death and resurrection. The Church has been given to us by the grace of God. It is a special gift from the love of God. So the mission of our church is clear: We give our best back to God and to our community through our worship, prayer, service and witnessing God's love and grace to the world. This matches up perfectly with our church mission statement: "To promote the love of Christ and nurture spiritual growth for each individual, the church and the community." Reaching out to our community is another goal in our mission. I heard that Fair Oaks United Methodist started as a confederated church between a

Methodist group and a Presbyterian group around 1940's on this hill, but years later, this was chartered to a Methodist Church years. Fair Oaks Church has been fulfilling its mission for over sixty years. Most of the chartered members maybe not be here with us, but this church has continued to keep working on God's mission by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We thank God that the Spirit is still moving in this church. As today's Scripture reading reminds us, "brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, you have brought yourselves and presented your bodies as a living sacrifice and gifts to God, because you love God and you love this community of faith."

Today's Scripture reading shows us Apostle Paul's theological understanding of God's church. It will be helpful for us to listen to his insight and inspirational view on church. The Apostle Paul spent his entire life as a missionary and a new church planter. He traveled at least for 15 years over Asia Minor and Greece and planted churches. In other words, he was a circuit rider like in early Methodism, riding a horse to preach the word of God to local churches He wrote more than 13 books of the New Testament. Among the books, we would say that he is the strongest advocate of our Christian faith out of Jewish tradition.

Let's revisit our Scripture reading. Paul hadn't visited this church in Rome yet, but he wrote this letter from the Corinthian church. He heard that there was a conflict and disagreement inside the church community because of a different understanding about the law of Moses. Around A.D. 60, the city of Rome was of course a big city like the city of Sacramento or San Francisco in New Testament times because Rome was the most politically significant city. It was also the home of an important congregation of first-century Christians. Many Jews had migrated to Rome resulting in a church of both Jews and many newly converted Non-Jewish people. From the point of view of Jewish people, the others were called Gentiles. There was a serious disagreement regarding the law of Moses. Obviously, Jewish Christians believe that they have to keep the law of Moses, but Gentile Christians didn't feel like following the law any more because Jesus came and showed a new principle and law for them. Who do you think was right? Paul wrote this letter to a Church in Rome for some advice. To give a right understanding on church to a Church congregation in Rome was the purpose of this letter.

In our reading, first of all, Apostle Paul wanted to make sure that God sent Jesus Christ to forgive our sins and made us acceptable to Him. This is a

basic foundation in our faith. He doesn't mean the law is useless, but that only those who have faith in Jesus Christ can become fully acceptable to God. He also highly emphasizes that "we are one body in Christ as a 'living organ.' We have many members, but each member doesn't have the same function. Apostle Paul explains that church is not 'individuals only', but 'interconnected' as one body with many different cells in our body. It functions as an independent part, but it can't live being away from the body. God has called each of us to join one body of Christ regardless ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or our different backgrounds. Church is a communal gathering in our individual - oriented society. Especially, caring and responsible heart and actions for one another was the core of Christian community as 'one body of Christ.' When Jesus taught us how to pray, he taught us to pray "Our God, who art in heaven" not to "my God."

Individualism has been an important cultural aspect of Western culture, as time went, our society starting losing the Spirit of community and the value of caring for another through intimate community. Nowadays, our society and world is becoming individually oriented. Egoism and consumerism are actively dominating our culture. What can we do for our community, our nation and this world? Is there any mission for the church to help this society?

In the 1980's, sociologist Robert N. Bellah and his fellows published a book called *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. This book keenly shows us an example of challenges similar to what we are facing in this society. There is a new term named "Sheilaism" in this book. Sheila is one of interviewees' who has named her religion after herself. Sheila Larson is a young nurse who describes her faith "Sheilaism." This symbolically shows how many people identified themselves as a center of the world. She said: "My religion is just to try to love yourself, and be gentle with yourself." Gradually and steadily, we are losing sense of community and belonging in our society. Individualism has been replaced with "Sheilasim." After 30 years, there isn't much changed: our society has become more private, individually isolated and consumer-oriented society where money and shopping is more valuable than a sense of caring community.

Paul reminds us not to "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 perfect." God is calling each of us to be co-workers and to share God's ministry for the broken and wounded

world. You bring your spiritual gifts and share your talents, time and offer your service not just for yourself but for this world. Our Church is called to do God's work for the world. Unpack your spiritual gifts for our church and for our community. Church must be a gift to this world where people can come and find a place for acceptance, caring love and hope for their lives. Church should always be actively working to fulfill our mission to our individuals and to our community. I hope that our church can continue to be a good example of God's church with offering our warm, welcoming and gracious hospitality to newcomers and visitors as you have showed to my family. Furthermore, we can reach out to serve others who are in need of our care, healing and those who are in hunger for a community. We bring our gifts and talents together to build God's community here and now. That is the mission of God's church and the people of God's ministry for this world.