

Gifts

Honoring Karen Umberger's Retirement as Music Director—August 23, 2020
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Romans 12:1-8

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 perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 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.

On this farewell Sunday as we honor the ministry of Karen Umberger it is so appropriate that our Epistle lesson is about the special gifts which God has bestowed upon the Church. Karen is truly a gifted woman and today we celebrate her skill, so gratefully shared with the St. Luke's congregation for these thirty-one years. Yes, this is a time to honor you, Karen, but this is not to be all about Karen. She has blessed us with a *God-given* gift, and if we have been paying attention, she has also taught us a great deal about the meaning of God's gifts. Today's message starts with Karen and I have much to say about this dear servant of God, but follow the story line carefully, for it is a lesson for us all.

Karen is a gifted lady! Paul wrote: *We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.* By God's grace, that is, God's unmerited favor and generosity to us, we have each been given spiritual gifts – special skills and abilities. Karen has a special gift of music. To say that one is gifted means that not all have this same gift. I dare to share a recent story from our music director search committee, which I trust will break no confidentialities of our committee's work. One resume which we received gave a lengthy listing of job experiences and skills, from waitressing to the factory floor to the front office, but absolutely no mention of any musical abilities or work. I was impressed by

this person's work ethic and flexibility. It was concluded by our committee that this resume was probably sent to us by an automated service which sent that employee profile to any presented job opening. The group quickly concluded that this profile should be discarded, but I objected, for I noticed that toward the end of the report this person asserted that they were "a quick learner"! Karen has a gift, and even the quickest of learners would take years to build up the skills which she possesses. And having pointed out her obvious gifts, it must also be noted the Paul insists that *We have gifts that differ*. A musical gift is a uniquely obvious gift, and our gifts are probably not so immediately apparent, but we all have gifts which demand a response. How has God gifted you, and how are you using those gifts for God's glory?

Having mentioned spiritual gifts Paul immediately proceeds to exhort the Church to exercise those gifts! One might point out some rare savant whose miraculous level of skill seems to be effortless, but even the savant needs to practice. How gifted were you Karen, when you started at St. Luke's thirty-one years ago? You were gifted then, and are gifted now. The joy has been watching those gifts develop and improve over that time of service, and behind all that joy was a lot of hard work! Thank you for your diligence. Over the years I have taught classes about spiritual gifts, and the topic may attract many listeners for it sounds so magical. As a class on spiritual gifts moves along some lose interest as they realize that a spiritual gift always leads a Christian into a pile of work, and it is often challenging work! Today we celebrate a gifted woman, who is deeply grateful for that gift and all the work which it involved, and we gather as a grateful Church family who have been so blessed by that gift.

Paul's mention of spiritual gifts here in Romans 12 is one of a number of teachings which he gives on gifts, for this is a topic of great importance to the Christian with many implications. He starts by stressing the central importance of our doing all to serve God. *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 are all meant to be servants of God and our special gifts are to be used for that purpose. One of the dangers for the Christian in the field of music is that of becoming focused only upon the quality of one's performance. It is too easy to fall in love with the beauty of the musical piece and the joy of making it happen, and to forget its ultimate purpose of glorifying God. Karen, you have always worked your hardest to hone each musical number, as you should, and you have always performed it for the praise and glory of God. Amen!

Over the years I have referred to Karen as our music director, choir director, organist, pianist or bells director (or "Chief ding-a-ling" when I'm in a mood to torment!). Karen came with the title "Director of Music Ministry," and she has regularly addressed her work by that title. The moniker always seemed a little long and awkward to me, but I have come to understand your attachment to it. You always saw the importance of that word "minister"! Lest any of you think that the title minister originated as a title of earthly prestige or exaltation, think again. A minister is a servant. Most literally

translated, a minister is a person of “minor station.” You always knew your call to serve.

You know your call to serve God. It is a pleasure for a pastor to work with a music leader who understands the ultimate purpose of every worship gathering, and that is the exaltation of Jesus Christ! A moment ago, I spoke of the temptation of pride in the ministry of music. There were many times when I could see and sense you bursting with delight over an especially well performed piece by one of our choirs. You took a deep and sweet pride in that moment, as well you should have, but all this joy was rooted in the greatest thrill of all—having been able to lead God’s people in praise before the Almighty!

You also recognized that your service to God was to be performed through your service to God’s people. You were a minister, and also a director—a leader! You gathered choirs of all ages. You encouraged people of all levels of ability. You built teams, and brought folks together into the highest kind of service. You blessed the gathered congregation and encouraged all to sing. You taught and affirmed so many biblical lessons! On more than one occasion I have stepped into the pulpit after hearing several songs of praise, each speaking spiritual lessons of great depth, and prefaced my sermon with the confession that they have already heard many great sermons in that day. Karen, you are a servant—the highest rank in the Kingdom of God.

You received a gift early in your life and have run faithfully with that God given skill. Sometimes that gift and calling took you to places that were challenging. I shall always remember your exuberant leading of music during Vacation Bible School, particularly in the years before our sanctuary was air conditioned. And you never passed out! It was occasionally grueling service, but you always did it with a certain joy for you knew how crucially important it was that these children have that song of the Gospel in their hearts.

There is much more that could be said, but I am trying to keep my comments brief. This is a day for music. Let me conclude by pointing out the cardinal virtue of the truly gifted, of the servant, of the great leader. Karen, you loved your people. That is what God wanted you to do, and that is where true ministry begins. Some of us are not always easy to love and work with, but that goes with the territory. You loved as Christ loved, and in that the Savior has been glorified.

I suppose I have said a great deal about Karen, and this is only right as this is her day. But class, please pay attention to the gifted teacher, for she has presented us with innumerable lessons of faith, humility and service! May Karen’s faithfulness with her God-given gift cause us all to identify and to reflect our own gifts, that as God’s great choir we may all blend these gifts together for God’s praise and glory.