

Great Expectations
(1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

When God spoke to Abram and told him to “leave your country, your people, and your father’s household and go to the land where I will show you,” God had great expectations of Abram. “I will make you a great nation and will bless you ...”

When God sent Moses and Aaron to Egypt to free the Israelites from bondage, God had great expectations of Moses and Aaron and for the people of Israel – “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

When God commissioned Isaiah to take an important message to the people of Judah, God had great expectations of Isaiah. God said, “Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for ... go and tell the people of Judah.”

When Jesus was baptized by the Holy Spirit and called to redeem the world by suffering death on a cross, God had great expectations of Jesus.

When God created Adam and Eve to be caretakers of Creation, God had great expectations of them. Well, I suppose four out of five isn’t too bad, even for God. Please pray with me.

God of Great Expectations, make the words I speak your words and your words alone. As we hear the scripture read and the word proclaimed enlighten us with the power of the Holy Spirit as we learn about the great expectations you have of us and the body of Christ. Awaken within us the gifts of the Spirit and send us to be Christ’s hands in

the world. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

God has great expectations of you. And age and ability have nothing to do with it. Abram was seventy-five years old when he folded his tent and set out for Canaan. Moses had a speech impediment but was called to go speak the word of God to Pharaoh. God has great expectations of you too!

Think of a time in your life when someone – your mother or father, a teacher, your spouse, your employer, a friend, or a pastor – told you that they have great expectations of you. Or think of a time when you have told someone of your great expectations of them. All of us who are parents have certainly had great expectations of our children.

It’s true, God does have great expectations of each of us. And those great expectations are meant to be translated into “Christian action” – putting our faith into action. Christian action means serving Christ’s holy church. Service, is the fourth of the five elements of our baptismal covenant which we renewed two weeks ago. That covenant calls us to support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Service, then, is one of the five ways we connect with our baptismal covenant.

God didn’t just call us into service. God first created us for service and then equipped us for service in the body of Christ. Listen again to what Paul says in his letter to the Church at Corinth. “For just as the body is one and has

many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.” [1 Corinthians 12:12-13]

Paul goes on to explain that God has equipped us with gifts of the Spirit. Even though we are one in the body of Christ, each of us has unique gifts that help the church function as one body. These special gifts are called spiritual gifts. These gifts are awakened in us through the work of the Holy Spirit according to God’s plan for our lives. It’s these gifts of the spirit that embody God’s great expectations for us. God doesn’t call us without equipping us.

I remember my first day at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. It was Tuesday morning and I was attending worship. Sitting there, utterly alone in the midst of two hundred other students, I began to question my call. My first thought was that God had played some kind of cruel trick on me.

All of sudden I was terrified. After 25 years I would be back in the classroom, taking exams, writing papers, and interacting with people who were, for the most part, younger than me and had little in common with me. I almost got up and walked out of that worship service without ever attending a single class.

As my anxiety peaked, the young preacher for the day took his place in the pulpit. As a third year student who would graduate at the end of the quarter he “had been there, done that” having once sat where I was now sitting. God spoke to me when this young man asked if we were wondering why we were here. Many heads nodded. Then through this youthful preacher God

spoke to me. “Don’t worry. I wouldn’t have called you without equipping you. Now this doesn’t mean that I won’t ever give you more than you can carry, but I will equip you to carry the load if you only trust in me.” Since that day I have continued to trust God and so far God has held up his promise.

God has great expectations for you, but God has equipped you to live up to those expectations. You have gifts that have already been awakened within you. You also have gifts that have yet to be awakened. These are gifts of the Spirit, woven into the fabric of your lives when you were being formed in the womb. And these gifts are made real in that awesome community we know as the body of Christ.

It’s in and through the body of Christ that our spiritual gifts are transformed into the hands of Christ in the world today. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians compares the body of Christ – the church – to the human body. Each part of the body is needed. One part is no more or less important to the body than any other part. If one part is ailing it affects the entire body. The analogy of the human body translates directly to the church. When one of us is ailing it affects the church as a whole.

People often challenge or question the need for attending and participating in the life of the church. They say “I don’t need church. I worship God and pray in my own way.” If the church is the body of Christ, this argument makes no sense. It’s not about us needing the church. It’s about the church needing us. Folks that don’t participate in the life of the church detract from the body. They may not need the church, but the church needs them. The church needs us all to bring together our special gifts – the gifts of

the Spirit – to do the work of the church. Remember, God has great expectations for each and every one of us, not just the few faithful participants.

Another argument I frequently hear is “I don’t have any special gifts.” This is simply not true. God has gifted each one of us in many different ways. Those who don’t believe in spiritual gifts just haven’t experienced an awakening of their gifts. It’s the work of the Holy Spirit that is responsible for that awakening. In order for the Holy Spirit to work within us it’s important for each of us to be open to the Holy Spirit, to listen and look for evidence of the movement of the Spirit in and through our lives.

When the work of the Holy Spirit awakens our gifts sometimes we don’t realize what’s happening. We are distracted by our secular lives and are distanced from God. From time to time we need a little help in discerning our spiritual gifts. If we know more about how God has gifted us, it helps us to be more aware of how God is calling and equipping us. Discernment can come through a *spiritual gifts inventory*. It’s relatively painless. By answering some questions about likes and dislikes and scoring your responses, it’s possible to learn how God may have gifted you – how God may be equipping you to be the hands of Christ in the world.

Have you ever participated in a spiritual gifts inventory? One of my visions for this church is to conduct a congregation-wide spiritual gifts inventory. By discovering our spiritual gifts together we can begin to understand our purpose in the world. Being aware of our spiritual gifts helps us to see just where and how we might live up to God’s great expectations. Being aware of our spiritual gifts helps

keep the body of Christ healthy and fit for service in the world. Being aware of our spiritual gifts helps us to fulfill our baptismal covenant.

Now some of us might think we know all about our spiritual gifts, whether or not we have ever participated in an inventory. But our gifts change as our situation in life changes. The Holy Spirit is always at work, awakening new gifts or reawakening old ones according to God’s great expectations.

Some people also believe their spiritual gifts follow closely with their vocation. This can be the case, but never assume so. For example, a teacher in the secular world, doesn’t necessarily have teaching as a spiritual gift. Pastors don’t always have the gift of being an apostle. And nurses and doctors are not always spiritual healers.

Paul identifies a few spiritual gifts like being an apostle or a prophet, a teacher or a healer, a helper or a leader. Paul’s list, however, is short. Biblically, there are an infinite number of spiritual gifts. The spiritual gifts inventory I like to use lists thirty-two gifts that can be found at work in the body of Christ. Those gifts are listed in an insert in your bulletin this morning. Read down the list. Are these the only spiritual gifts we might receive? No, not at all. There are many gifts. This list simply consolidates the infinite into a finite number.

Do we each have all thirty-two gifts? Certainly not. When you participate in a spiritual gifts inventory you will probably find that you have more than one gift, even many. But one or two will be emphasized over the rest indicating dominant gifts. Your dominant spiritual gifts are probably those gifts that you should be actively seeking to use. These are areas of your

ministry in which God probably has the highest expectations of you.

Want to know more about your spiritual gifts? See me. I will share the inventory with you. In the meantime, I do look forward to a congregation-wide inventory. Together we can develop a better understanding of what God's great expectations might be for us, as individuals and as a church.