

"VIVA LA DIFFERENCE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

I came across a year old issue of Yankee magazine in the cottage that we rent in Maine that had an interesting article entitled, "Sensitive Specialists". It described some people who make their living making extraordinary use of their natural senses. It told of the practiced eye of a diamond inspector, the sense of feel of a wool inspector, the developed ear of a cymbal tester, the sense of smell of a fresh fish inspector, and the sense of taste of a milk-tester. All the men acknowledged that they had no special gift in the area of their natural senses. They had simply trained themselves to use what they had to a high degree, maximizing the use of their senses.

Last Winter, People magazine carried a story about J. Paul Barnett. Barnett is a rather unusual musician. He is a concussionist. Note that I did not say percussionist. He does not play the drums. No, he is a concussionist. He plays the cannon. For a number of years he has had the hobby of building antique firearms, especially cannons. More recently he discovered that his hobby could contribute to a symphony performance by providing the cannon sounds for works like Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture".

Barnett was quoted as saying that some of his early musical attempts did not go that well and that he sometimes produced "pops" instead of "booms". He had problems with timing, and there was always the possibility of a misfire. Now, however, he has an established niche with a number of major orchestras.

DEVELOPMENT

In the 12th chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul gives us an interesting picture of how Christians fit into the body of Christ! Different interests. Different talents. Different skills. A niche for everyone is included. Viva la difference! That's a French phrase usually employed to celebrate the differences between women and men. It's also a wondrous way to describe the uniqueness of every one of us.

God has created us all as individuals. We simply cannot stress that enough. None of us has the same fingerprints or footprints. Each of us even has his or her own tongue print. I haven't figured out how they get the samples. I hope it doesn't entail putting your tongue on an ink pad like you do for a fingerprint.

Police are now relying on DNA prints. If they even find a hair or a tiny fragment of skin at the scene of a crime, the criminal can be positively identified. At the most basic level of our existence, we are all unique.

And we have unique voices. A professor at the University of Chicago has recorded numerous voices of certain celebrities on tape and then scrambled the words so they're unintelligible. Only the tone and the pitch are left. Yet students can identify not only the mood and the situation but also the person. The personalities are perfectly identifiable from this intangible factor - the timbre of the voice. Physically, we are all very special people.

And we are all unique mentally as well. Consider the right and the left functions of the brain that has been undergoing research. It's exciting.

Someone in this room may be a James Bond fan. I am and perhaps you are, too. Near the beginning of one of the early and most famous Bond adventures, Dr. No,

we're told that James Bond need not be concerned about some of the injuries sustained on his previous mission. He notes that an average person can manage without his gall-bladder, a spleen, tonsils, appendix, one kidney, one lung, two quarts of blood, two-fifths of his liver, most of his stomach, four feet of intestines and finally - half his brain.

Somewhat amazing! We could get along with half a brain. Scientists have discovered that the left and right hemispheres of our brain function in different ways. Some experts say that they perform different tasks. The left side is concerned with language and logic. The right side is said to be the creative, emotive, artistic side.

From what I gather our educational system is set up to cater to left brain aptitudes - those that require logic and language skills. Suppose, however, you happen to be a right brain dominant child. You may be labeled as slow...something of a dreamer, an under-achiever. Maybe not. Maybe you are simply a right-brained person in a left-brained world. We are all unique, valued and special. We all have a contribution to make to the world. We all have our niche. Yes, viva la difference. God has created us all as special individuals and as such, we all have different gifts. Moving on, then...

OUR GIFTS SHOULD BE OFFERED TO HIS SERVICE

gifts to His service. Hear Paul's words,

I believe that it is God's purpose that we offer our unique

"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them. If prophecy, in accordance to our faith. If service, in our serving. He who teaches, in his teaching. He who exhorts, in his exhortation. He who contributes, in liberality. He who gives aid, with zeal. He who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

Notice these words in particular, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us..."

I think that people are often afraid to get involved in ministry or to take responsibility for an area unless they view themselves as superstars. Perhaps there is a failure to understand what the Bible says about spiritual gifts. God has designed things so all of us have areas where we can contribute and make a difference, and all of us have those areas in our lives where we need the contributions of others. The trick is to do those things that we can do and not sit idly on our hands because we're incapable of excelling in all areas, or not in agreement with how the job may be getting done. (But that's for another sermon!)

Consider former Boston Celtic coaching great, "Red" Auerbach. Auerbach has a reputation of being able to use older stars effectively after they have passed their prime or reached their peak. What's his secret? He sat down with such a player and explained what he expected that player to contribute to the team over the next few years. Yes, frequently, the role was a diminished version of what the player could once have done. Red, however, would often tell a player,

"We have a real need here and you are capable of filling it. If you will focus on what you can still do well, instead of what you once could do, you can help the team a lot..."

For most players, that understanding freed them to do a few things well and not be

paralyzed with regret at their shortcomings. I like the sound of this approach. You and I need not be superstars to serve God. We all have gifts that can be used to His glory.

OUR GIFTS AND A NEED

Move on now to another point, another thought. We also need to see that we may not even know what our gifts are until we respond to a need. Now spiritual gifts within the body of Christ are different from talents. Most of us, I think, know what our talents are but we may not know what our gifts are.

For example, some of the finest preachers that the Church has produced were not talented as orators. Some had to conquer speech deficiencies or perhaps extreme nervousness and similar defeating situations. But that did not keep them from being gifted preachers, in every sense of the word. Some of you may not have a talent for teaching. Your talent might lie in your ability to empathize with young people. Both lesson preparation and presentation may be something you struggle with, but because of your willingness to work and your concern for young lives and willingness to get involved, you discover a spiritual gift as a teacher. It's happened with many. It could happen with you.

Even when we have certain natural abilities, they must find expression according to a particular need or opportunity. Somone once asked Isaac Stern why he took up the violin. Why not the piano? He replied that the violin was the instrument his mother gave him. He said,

"I believe that music is from the heart...the instrument is just the appartus. I have nice fingers. I could have been a good pianist. My mother gave me the violin".

It's interesting that in this particular list of gifts given us here in Romans 12 that Paul includes contributing with liberality, giving aid with zeal, doing acts of mercy with cheerfulness. Those obviously are not gifts that require a particular talent - only the recognition of a need or an opportunity. There are many such needs and many such opportunities. And you may not even know that you have a particular gift until you respond to a need. Think on these things as we launch another season of service in Christ's name in this place. Look around and see where you fit in. What are the needs. What are the areas where you perhaps can make a difference. Don't be a spectator. Be involved. Christian commitment, like music, comes from the heart.

AND HURTS CAN BE TURNED INTO GIFTS

And you know, even our hurts can be turned into gifts. This is another point to make. How many times have persons who have been through the valley of suffering been the very ones who have been best able to minister to others who are walking through a similar valley? I've seen it many times. So when making an inventory of the things you might offer to God, do not ignore what may seem to be your weaker points.

One of Aesop's fables tells the story of a deer - a handsome buck - that came to a spring to drink. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the water and admired his strong and beautifully shaped antlers. He was not as impressed with the appearance, however, of his legs...thin and weak. While he was engrossed in admiring himself in the spring, a lion appeared and charged him. The buck fled and easily outdistanced the lion, for his true strength was in his thin legs. In the open fields he had no problem staying in front of the lion.

But unfortunately, he soon ran into wooded country where his antlers became entangled in the tree branches. And the lion caught him. The buck thought to himself,

"Alas...my legs which I thought were too frail were my salvation and the antlers which I thought to be my strength were in fact my destruction!"

Remember that God can use anything we offer to Him in a grand and a wondrous way. He can use our weaknesses as well as our strengths. He can use the hard lessons we have learned as well as our youthful enthusiasms. If there is a need, God can take whatever we offer and make good use of it! Remember that.

AND EVERYONE HAS SOMETHING TO OFFER

one of us has a place in the Kingdom.

And the final point is, yes - everyone of us has something to offer. Every-

Dr. W. A. Criswell tells of a man by the name of Tony who came to his study every Sunday morning and helped him off with his coat and hung it on the rack. Then when the time came for Dr. Criswell to go to the pulpit, this man would help him robe and then go before him and hold the door open. This was all he could do but he always did it every Sunday "as unto the Lord"!

Some of the church members told Tony that he was bothering the pastor with this little routine. Tony came to Dr. Criswell to see if that was true. Dr. Criswell gently said to him,

"No, Tony...not at all...you're not bothering me at all. I appreciate what you are doing for me."

When the church built a new building across the street, the pastor's study was located there. And on the first Sunday in the new building Tony asked Dr. Criswell if he might walk across the street before him and hold the door open for him. Dr. Criswell told him that would be fine...great. And so Tony went ahead and proudly held open the door as his pastor entered the church auditorium.

A few days later Tony suddenly dropped dead. Dr. Criswell said that maybe it was just wild fancy, but he believed that when he got to heaven, Tony would be there to open the door for him. He couldn't do much, but he did what he could and he did it to the glory of God. Bless those like him. They make a difference.

CLOSING

We have some marvelously talented people in this Church. Some of them are using their talents in splendid ways to serve God. And there are others who are not as talented, but in the Kingdom of God, they are, however truly gifted. They respond to needs as we have them. They give generously of what they have and they are discovering the blessings of God upon their lives.

Where do you fit in to this? We each have gifts to offer to God's service. Some of us won't even know what those gifts are until we respond to a specific need or opportunity. Even our most painful experiences can turn out to be gifts. Remember that each of us has something to offer. I would never have dreamed that a fellow who fires a cannon would fit into an orchestra. That's a new one for me. But, the Kingdom of God is like that. There is a place for everybody to play and to serve and as we do, some great and glorious music can be heard.

PRAYER

And so may it be, O God, in our lives here in this Church that is our spiritual home in this city. Take us - our talents, skills and gifts - and help us to be "sensitive specialists" in lifting the level of life around us in the days ahead. Help us to preach the Gospel at all times in what we do, and when necessary to use words.

Together may we play so glorious music. May others hear and be moved and lifted, helped and healed. In the spirit of Christ, our Conductor, we now pray. Amen.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, September 9, 1990

I. GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A word of greeting to the visitors....pleased you are worshipping with us...hope that we'll have opportunity to greet you personally before you leave.
- B. Fill out a visitor card. Sign a guest book. Join us for coffee downstairs. Worship with us again and come, work with us, too, in the programs of outreach...
- C. Final word. We've been doing the Lord's work here since 1837. Fourth building. Minister to a parade of people. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit...

II. SUNDAY SCHOOL

- A. Sunday School resumes today. Classes have been arranged and teachers have been recruited. Be in touch with either Brenda or Duane Thompson about lending a hand....

III. PICK UP YOUR COPY

- A. Be sure to pick up your copy of the September issue of our monthly news sheet. Copies are by the door...our thanks to Lucy Dinnes for all of her work in writing up...

IV. THIS WEEK

- A. Busy week as we start to put together our Fall program. Note the meetings and study and spiritual growth opportunities for this week: Trustees, Administrative Council, Day School Evaluation Committee and Education Committee. 4 meetings. Also the "Hounds" and the "Aldersgate" Calls.
- B. Other notices or concerns to share...
- C. Roses on the altar: mentioned in the Word In Edgeways.

V. OFFERING

- A. Jesus said,

"It is more blessed to give than it is to receive."

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 9, 1990

ETERNAL GOD IN CHRIST, grant us grace to worship Thee in spirit and in truth.

We believe that in these moments of worship the deepest things within us are being stirred up...and that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be.

Wrestle with us, O God, until we are conquered by Your love.

And grant us such spiritual wealth that we will be made aware of ETERNAL REALITIES...that captured by a vision of the Christ-like life, we will be lifted out of our littleness by our dedication to abiding values and to Your everlasting purpose for us.

CLEANSE US, O GOD...from our evil ways, our ugly egotism, our indifferent apathy, our sinful lusts...that we may be ready for this transforming experience.

GRANT US HONESTY in confronting and confessing our sins.

We do not mean to live...oblivious...to the perplexities and turmoil that surrounds us or the hunger and the tragedies that fill our world.

Forgive us, Lord, for having shunned costly involvement.

We like our relaxation, our comfortable living style, our full stomachs. With our preoccupation with things, we haven't really sensed any great need of You.

We confess that we have been slow to pray...until the odds mounted against us. We have been neglectful of justice and couldn't care less about human rights for others until the oppressed have made a scene and embarrassed us. We have been short on charity until it was legislated for us.

Our hypocrisy is self-evident, Lord. We have accepted the Gospel's high demand with our lips but not with our lives.

BUT IN SPITE OF OUR HUMANNES, our weaknesses, our self-indulgence, our neglect, YOU dared to entrust Your Kingdom to us. Admittedly, the paradise we have built is organizational and institutional. And we have succeeded in perfecting the market place, but not your Kingdom of Kindness. We have instant communication worldwide, but not the reconciling word for our neighbor.

HEAR, O GOD, our confession of confusion. And by Your Holy Spirit, touch us, and renew within us, each one of us, the heart of grace.

MINISTER TO OUR PERSONAL NEEDS, DEAR FATHER, IN THIS TIME OF WORSHIP.

Walk through this community of great faith now and be the help
and comfort, the inspiration and sustenance of our souls.

Comfort us in our bereavement. Steady our spirits in sickness.
Keep our hearts steadfast in practical distress.

In temptation, in illness, in disappointment and depression, in defeat
when we are tempted to give up....in success when we are tempted
to be proud and haughty - O God, restore our souls.

May we hear YOUR voice speaking to each of us, reassuring us,
challenging us, summoning us to great things in days ahead, to
dedicated and victorious living.

ALL THIS WE NOW PRAY in the name of the Good Shepherd who gently brings us
HOME to Himself.