

“Learning to Dance”

1 Corinthians 12:4-18 ¹

On the screen you see the somewhat unusual letters, “WiLTS.” “WiLTS” is an acronym I invented some years ago that stands for “We Love This Stuff!” (the “i” is just for pronunciation). I frequently mention WiLTS! when church life or staff life or committee life gets aggravating as a reminder to myself and others that we do what we do in the life of the Church because God is uniquely involved in that life.



The truth of the matter is that I really do “love this stuff,” and I get out of bed every day deeply grateful to be your Pastor. Even on the long days, on the hard days, on the crummy days, on the way to the hospital or the emergency room late at night, *I love what I do*. I’m grateful to God for the privilege of walking with you in the glad moments, the painful moments, the transforming moments, and the ordinary moments of your lives.

While God may not have called you to be a Pastor (though God may be working on some of you about that), God has called you to a life that is energizing and world-changing, so that God’s Kingdom might come in Columbia as it is in heaven. The truth is that every one of us is called to “full-time Christian service,” though we pay our bills by doing different things.

Look again at 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.” It takes all of us to get the job done!

You’ll remember that we’re making our way “around the bases” of our church organization, from **Worship** to **Fellowship** to **Discipleship** to **Ministry** to **Evangelism**, which we can also call **Worship**, **Connect**, **Grow**, **Serve**, and **Go**. This morning, we come to “third base,” “Ministry,” which has to do with using the gifts God has given us to build up the Church.

His name was Wayne. Born into poverty in a South Carolina mill town, he grew up in a fatherless family where his mother worked in horrible conditions in the textile mills so there would be at least a little food for them to eat. Wayne was a hard worker and an eager learner. The adults in his life encouraged him to nurture bold dreams, and he eventually made his way to Mars Hill College in western North Carolina, not far from Asheville.

As God continued to work in his life, Wayne became the pastor of a small church near his home, and eventually Wayne made his way to seminary, where he demonstrated such promise that he was asked to join the faculty. Although he spent the rest of his career in academics, Wayne’s pastoral heart, steeped in Scripture and shaped by pain, found expression as he wrote more than fifty books on pastoral care and counseling. He literally defined the field, and to this day, years after his resurrection, Wayne continues to be the author who, in my judgment, most effectively integrates biblical truth with helping skills. I taught at the seminary in the department he founded, and I was grateful to call him my teacher and friend.

Her name was Jan. She spent most of her formative years as a pastor’s daughter in Hawaii. While that sounds romantic, it also meant that she grew up as an ethnic minority in an essentially “foreign” culture. Those years of being white in a brown culture and being a

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preacher's kid to boot taught Jan what it's like to live on the edge of things, what it feels like to be on the outside looking in.

God continued to work in Jan's life, and she, too, felt a call into vocational ministry. For a number of years, her ministry was with preschoolers and children and their families. In a later season of her life, Jan served on a church staff with me. During our years together, Jan was wonderfully helpful to me and to all of the rest of the staff as she helped us grow in our awareness of how we might offer welcome to persons who were guests on our campus. While I was busily thinking about getting a particular task accomplished, Jan helped me to see the "little things" that would express thoughtfulness and care to the persons involved, members and non-members alike.

Ken was one of my fraternity brothers at Georgetown College. Fun-loving but focused, Ken provided a moderating influence on some of our collective tendencies toward excess. It was always clear to the rest of us that God was at work in Ken's life, so we weren't surprised when he became a missionary in Malawi. It seemed that Ken and his family always ended up in some of the hardest places imaginable. Sometimes the countries where they lived were experiencing famine; sometimes they were at war. Their location was so remote that one of their teenage sons died on Easter Sunday, 1997 out in the bush far beyond medical care . . . and Ben is buried there in the land that he loved.

Though you and I are able to worship today without fear, more persons have been killed in the last hundred years because of their faith in Jesus than in all the rest of Christian history, and God has put a passion in Ken's heart for encouraging believers who live under both the threat and the reality of religious persecution. His family continues to live overseas, and Ken routinely travels to the most remote corners of the earth as easily as you and I might drive to Philadelphia, encouraging believers and churches of whom you and I will never know.

Joyce lives in the beautiful horse country of Kentucky, though she and her husband have served in some of the most difficult urban centers of our land. While Joyce and Larry do raise horses, her "day job" when I knew her was that of a newspaper editor and freelance writer. Like Wayne, Jan, and Ken, Joyce lives with passion. She is passionate about many things, but Joyce's real passion is developing mature and fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

Joyce is an idea person. She's endlessly creative. I'm not sure Joyce even knows what the "inside of the box" looks like—she's always pushing the frontiers, boldly following the wind of the Spirit. When I served as a minister to adults, Joyce was one of my "think tank" folks, and I learned much from her. When one of our median adult classes needed a teacher, I asked Joyce to consider whether God might have that in mind for her. Joyce did indeed feel called to that work, and as she taught in the power of the Spirit, Joyce took a class that was struggling and transformed it into the largest of twenty-five adult Bible classes. People were eager to hear the wisdom with which she opened the Scriptures.

Win spent his working years as a funeral director. He found meaning and purpose in guiding families whose journey took them through the valley of the shadow of death. Being a funeral director was his business, but it was also his ministry, and it was an opportunity to offer the Hope that we have in Christ to many who never found their way into the church.

In the course of running such a business over many decades, Win developed an amazing ability to fix things. When I became responsible for managing our hundred thousand square foot church facility, my friendship with Win really took off! It didn't matter whether a key was broken off in a lock, whether the plumbing was leaking, whether lights needed

rewiring, whether I needed twenty-one wooden easels built—by Sunday—or whether we needed him to make four life-size wooden crosses, Win got it done . . . and he had fun doing it!

Finally, I want to tell you about Linda. As was or is true for the others I've mentioned, Linda lives with passion. She spent her working career as a high school biology teacher. Always popular with students, Linda had the ability to communicate heart content as well as head knowledge. One of the neatest things about Linda, though, is that she's a life-long learner as well as a wonderful teacher.

Linda takes her enrolment in Jesus' School of Discipleship very seriously, including the sweaty soul work of achieving and maintaining a clear spirit. One afternoon some years ago, Linda came into my office to do that work. Because she understood the critical importance of "clear spirit work" for the health of the church, and because she valued her relationship with me, Linda came to ask about something I had said some weeks before. That which burdened her was something I barely remembered; but I was very grateful for the opportunity to deepen understanding and to ask forgiveness for the pain I'd caused. Because Linda was willing to follow Jesus' guidelines in Matthew 18, she and I came to enjoy deeper friendship rather than a broken relationship.

Later, as she considered how God might want her to spend her time in retirement, Linda came to me to say that she wanted to help in our outreach and evangelism efforts. She confessed that she felt uncomfortable and unprepared for the work, but that she really wanted to stretch into what God was calling her to do. Linda became a key member of our outreach team, and, when I left that congregation, Linda became the coordinator of all the church's outreach efforts. We still keep in touch to this day, and it wouldn't surprise me a bit if she and Allen visited us here in Columbia.

By now you're surely wondering, "What's the deal with all these stories, and what in the world do they have to do with the title of this sermon?" I'll get to the title after a bit, but for now, you've probably noticed that Wayne, Jan, Ken, Joyce, Win, and Linda all have something in common. That something is that they find joy in what they do, and they're both amazed by and grateful for what God is pleased to do through them.

Why do these six persons experience life as being deeply fulfilling and joyful, even in the midst of the considerable personal pain that has come into each of their lives? Part of the answer to that question is that each of these women and men lives as a passionate and fully-devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

Another part of the answer is that each of these persons is living in that joyful creativity and fulfillment that comes from knowing their spiritual gifts and allowing God to empower the use of these gifts for the good of Christ's Body, the Church. If you want to experience more joy and more effectiveness in your life as a fully-devoted follower of Jesus, discovering and deploying your own spiritual gifts will go a long way toward the achievement of that goal.

When you first asked God to forgive your sin on the basis of what Jesus did for you on the Cross (think of this in the future tense if you've not yet chosen to do this), God not only caused you to be "born again" (John 3:3), but also gave you God's own Spirit as a Permanent Resident in your spirit. And, when God's Spirit came into your life, the Spirit also gave you at least one "spiritual gift." As we read earlier, *"There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. . . . Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good"* (1 Corinthians 12:4, 7).

Spiritual gifts are abilities that God empowers in such a way that when we use them, the result of our effort is much greater than what could be explained by our effort alone.

That is, the “output” is multiplied far beyond the “input.” As we sometimes say these days, “It’s a God thing.”

Though spiritual gifts and natural talents are similar, they’re not the same thing. As Paul Basden put it, “God may give the gift of evangelism to a natural-born salesman or He may not. He may give the gift of teaching to a professional schoolteacher, but He is not so bound. He may give the gift of faith to someone who is optimistic by nature, but He does not have to do so. . . . God bestows the gifts as He chooses. The rest is mystery.”²

The New Testament doesn’t give an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts, because our endlessly creative God continues to create new gifts to meet the changing needs of the church in a changing world. There are about thirty commonly-agreed-on gifts in the New Testament, though, and I will provide these for you with the online version of this sermon.

Perhaps it would be helpful to let Wayne, Jan, Ken, Joyce, Win, and Linda serve as examples of how spiritual gifts work. Let me suggest two spiritual gifts that I see in each of them:

- Wayne had the gifts of *Counseling and Teaching*. The gift of Counseling enabled Wayne to serve others through comfort, challenge, and encouragement, so that they experienced hope, help, and healing. The gift of Teaching enabled him to communicate profound truth in a manner that continues to cause others to grow and that contributes to the health of the church all over the world.
- Jan has the gifts of *Hospitality and Helps*. The gift of Hospitality enabled Jan to delight in making folks feel welcome and at home. Always seeing the little things that make a big difference, Jan expressed this gift in many situations at church as well as at home. The gift of Helps enabled Jan to use her own abilities to assist others with their work, thus releasing them to concentrate more fully on their particular ministries.
- Ken has the gifts of *Apostleship and Missionary*. The gift of Apostleship enables Ken to be recognized as a spiritual leader by many different churches and groups of Christians. The Missionary gift enables Ken to work effectively with believers in dozens of cultures around the world.
- Joyce has the gifts of *Teaching and Knowledge*. I’ve already mentioned teaching with Wayne. The gift of Knowledge enables Joyce to generate, collect, and analyze ideas that are important for the health of the church. I was not the only person who used Joyce as a wisdom counselor!
- Win has the gifts of *Craftsmanship and Service*. The gift of Craftsmanship enables Win to use his amazing “fix-it” abilities for the good of the Body of Christ. The gift of Service enables him to recognize where his help is needed, making sure that the most urgent jobs get done.
- And Linda has the gifts of *Helps and Prayer*. I’ve already mentioned Helps with Jan. The gift of Prayer enables Linda to pray for specific requests, whether in the church or in individual lives, over significant periods of time, opening herself to sometimes being used by God to respond to those requests.

² Paul Basden and Lee Johnson, *Basden-Johnson Spiritual Gift Analysis* (Hurst, TX: Gift-Based Ministry, Inc., 1987, 1998), p. 5. Neither are spiritual gifts the same thing as what Paul called “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). The fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—are character qualities, not skills or abilities, and every follower of Jesus is expected to produce such fruit.

Are you beginning to get the idea? As they focus their energies in the areas where God has gifted them, Wayne, Jan, Ken, Joyce, Win, and Linda experience joy and power in their daily lives, and they help God's Kingdom to "*come on earth as it is in heaven.*" As you and I discover the gifts God has given us, we, too, gain a clearer idea about what it is that God is calling us to do. As the famous Olympic runner, Eric Liddell, put it, "God made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure."

Now Wayne and the others didn't just wake up one morning and say, "I think I've got the gift of Counseling," or whatever. No, they began to pay attention to the things they did that brought them the most joy, and then they practiced and experimented with various opportunities in the church that seemed to use those abilities. As they prayed through these experiences over time, and as they sought the feedback of mature believers who knew them well, they became more sure of the areas where God's gifts made them most joyful and most effective . . . and they concentrated their efforts there.

Now in the family of God, just as in our own families, there are surely times when we need to do things that are not really in the areas of our strength, just because they need doing. But for the most part, we do well to focus in our areas of giftedness, because "*God has placed the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be*" (1 Corinthians 12:18). "*Under [God's] direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love*" (Ephesians 4:16, NLT).

Well, let me say a word about the title of this sermon, and we're done. Another way to think about how God organizes us "all together now" as parts of His Body is to say that God gives us the guidance we need, when we need it, in order that we might know how to join our lives together most effectively for eternal purposes. And I once saw a definition of God's **guidance** that called it "**God, U, and I Dancing.**" Isn't that great?

Sometimes our gifts are best used within the structures of the church, and sometimes they're best used "outside the walls" as we extend God's Kingdom into the world. In either case, growing into and living out of our spiritual gifts helps us to experience "life in all its fullness" as Jesus intends for us to do (John 10:10). The joy we then experience is contagious, and it serves to draw others to Jesus as well. Could life get any better than this?!