

You've Got Talent
1 Corinthians 12:1-13:3
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Do you remember this?

[Susan Boyle video clip]

It made me cry. And it made me pull out my CD of Les Mis. It was astonishing to see this awkward, homely, quirky woman belt out such a heart felt ballad. It seemed like the moment the show was created for – taking one totally unknown, and even unlikely person like Susan Boyle and making her a star!

There's a whole sub-genre of reality TV that's based on talent: America's Got Talent, American Idol, So You Think You Can Dance and others. They all promise to launch the career of the winner with a record deal or a show in Las Vegas.

These shows are fun, aren't they? I love it when someone auditions for American Idol who actually can sing. Not just sing in the shower or be praised by their parents, but who can really sing. Just the other night a young man from Texas who auditioned on American Idol and it was really good. It seemed so easy for him, and he clearly loved it. Another young man sang the blues and he was phenomenal. He could "she be bop" with the best of them. He was in his element. He wasn't faking it. It came from his core.

In the passage of scripture we read from 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about spiritual gifts. When folks are using their spiritual gifts it's like those young people from American Idol. There is an ease. Not that it's always easy to use one's gifts, but it fits. Folks are comfortable in their own skin. Their instincts are right. They feel joy in it. The person whose gift it is to teach loves to teach and gives his best time to preparing the lessons and thinking about how to do it

better and better. The person whose gift is hospitality welcomes people whether or not they are the greeter at church who hosting the party. They see and even anticipate needs of guests and strangers.

Spiritual gifts are gifts given by the Holy Spirit to individuals in the church to serve the mission and ministry of Christ – both inside the church walls and out in the world. Spiritual gifts are not synonymous with talents. A gifted public speaker is not automatically a great preacher. A talented school teacher may not have the spiritual gift of teaching for the building up of the church. He may not be able to open the stories of scripture in a way that makes them come alive for children or adults. A singer may have the spiritual gift of encouragement or healing and use their music to put those gifts into action. Who hasn't felt their spirit soothed or lifted by a beautiful song? A spiritual gift is like a talent in that it is both given and needs to be nurtured in order to grow. But a spiritual gift isn't just part of our DNA. It comes from the Holy Spirit and develops as we grow closer and closer to God.

So all good, right? Wrong. What ends up happening to us and that happened to the folks to whom Paul was writing, is that jealousy breaks out. A hierarchy develops. Some spiritual gifts are considered better than others. Just like our lives right? There's a reason why American Idol is about developing pop stars and not CPA's. The show is So You Think You Can Dance? Not so you think you can crunch numbers. Some spiritual gifts, just like some talents and some jobs are just more glamorous than others. In Paul's day everybody became fixated on the showier gifts. Those who could speak in tongues – that is in other languages or in unknown languages – thought they had something over those who couldn't. During worship folks at First Church Corinth would interrupt each other to speak in tongues or to offer a word from God.

Their worship was chaotic, more focused on their own glorification than on glorifying God. Each cared more about building himself up than building up the community of faith.

So Paul writes to them (and to us) to give us a reality check. He reminds us that spiritual gifts are given by God to build the church. They are not given so that we can be popular, powerful or prestigious. The gifts are given to encourage, serve or nurture those in the church or to enable the church to reach out to those outside it. Though spiritual gifts may bring attention to us, they are never about us.

And without love, spiritual gifts are nothing. If a gift is not used with love nor for the purpose of love it is nothing. Talents persist even if the bearer is mean spirited, narcissistic and selfish. How often do we say, “well so and so is a real jerk but he sure can golf, or sing, or play basketball.” A spiritual gift withers and dies if it is not nurtured and directed and used with love. “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Love is what gives a gift its power. Love is what makes the effects of a gift last. Love is the source and aim and purpose of gifts.

I believe that the Holy Spirit has given each person here a gift to use in love. If you want to know what your gift is – seek God and ask God, “how can I love others?” Start by doing what God reveals.