

"YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE"
OCTOBER 21, 1990

TEXT: Romans 12:6 "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given us, let us use them."

Last Wednesday we had some workmen here at the church working on the sidewalk that goes from the back of the parking lot to the Ridge Court entrance. As I passed that way on my way to lunch, I could see two large patches of lovely wet cement. No, I did not scratch my initials in it, but for one brief moment I was tempted. And then I wondered who else might be tempted. Would that cement be allowed to dry without someone trying to preserve himself --or herself-- for posterity.

When you get right down to it, that is probably the reason people carve their initials in trees or scratch them in cement. They want something of themselves to last. They may never be immortalized in front of Grauman's Chinese Theater like Hollywood celebrities, but as long as that tree stands, or as long as that sidewalk is there, something of themselves will remain. They want what we all want --to feel their being here has made a difference.

St. Paul writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways." (1 Corinthians 13:11) And most of us probably no longer carve our initials in things, once we become adults. But that does not mean we no longer want to be remembered --now and after we are gone. If we think we may not be remembered, we begin to feel like nobodies.

And mental health workers find themselves working with people like that much of the time, with people who fear that they are unwanted, unneeded, or unworthy. Carl Jung defined neurosis as "the suffering of the soul that has not found its meaning." And Viktor Frankl devised a whole new therapy to deal with what he called existential frustration --the despair over lack of meaning in life.

We all want to be important to someone or something. But more and more people today seem to wonder. We have telephone numbers, social security numbers, i.d. numbers, file numbers until we begin to question whether we are persons who count or things to be counted.

I once read about a woman who was interviewed by a census-taker. "How many children do you have?" he asked. "Well," she

said, "let me see --there's Fred, and Jim, and Sally . . ." "I don't want their names," the census-taker interrupted impatiently; "just their number." And, at that, the woman shouted, "They don't have numbers; they all got names." Don't we sometimes want to shout that, too? "I am not a number. I am not a thing. I am a person."

That is one reason why I like this morning's scripture so much. It tells us that we are Somebody. We are not unneeded or expendable. We are gifted. And every one of us has some talent, some ability which makes us useful human beings.

Most of you remember Jesus' parable of the talents. In it, he said, ". . . it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away." (Matthew 25:14-15) Their talents differed, just as our own do, but each servant had at least one.

So, in our text this morning, St. Paul writes, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . ." He did not say, "If we have gifts" or "Those of you who do have gifts." He assumed that every one of us has some talent or talents, given to us by God's grace. Those gifts differ, both in kind and in quantity. Some may have five talents, others two, still others only one. But we all have some gift God needs in the service of his kingdom. The problem is that sometimes one and two talent people look at five talent people and feel discouraged. They do not appreciate the talents that they have.

There is an old Spanish proverb that says, "When God wants something done, a baby is born." Well, this morning I would like to turn that around and say, "Whenever a baby is born, God has some purpose in mind. When you were born God had a purpose in mind. Whether it is for something relatively simple and little noticed or for something that makes headlines all around the world, God needs you. And that makes you important!

But what if we ignore that purpose? What good is our talent if, like the servant in that parable we bury it in the ground? St. Paul said, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion 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." (Romans 12:6-8)

That may sound a little strange to our ears, so let me rephrase it. "Having gifts that differ . . . let us use them: if singing, sing; if greeting, greet; if teaching, teach; if ushering, usher. He who contributes, in liberality, whether in time, or talent, or money. That is the way we make a difference with our lives. As Winston Churchill once observed, "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

That is especially true for those of us who follow the Congregational Way. As I announced a little while ago, this afternoon, at 3:00 o'clock, our church staff will host an informational forum for people who want to know more about this church.

One of the things I will talk about is our Congregational freedom. I will point out that we have no bishops, or synods, or other outside bodies to tell us what we can or can not do. I will stress the fact that this church --like Congregational churches everywhere-- is completely autonomous. We own our own property. We call our own ministers. We make our own decisions.

But the other side of that coin --which I will also stress-- is that there is no one "out there" to do for us the things we want done. Our National Association of Congregational Christian Churches offers fellowship and ideas, but no money, and no workers. Whatever gets done in this church must be done by us.

So I would like to change the title of this sermon, even though it is almost over. Back in August, when I planned this fall's preaching schedule, I entitled this sermon "You Can Make a Difference." But, if I had it to do over, I would call it, "You Always Make a Difference."

Whether we mean to be or not, we are either part of the problem or part of the solution. What this church is --tomorrow and next week, and next year-- depends upon us. On what we give of ourselves, and I do not just mean money, but that is certainly included. What we give of ourselves constitutes the building blocks that make up this church. There is no one else but us. What we provide in time, and talent, and treasure will determine whether this is a strong and vital church or a sick and struggling one.

Some may not like being reminded of that, but it is God's truth just the same. And pretending it is not will not change that. So I would like to leave you with one last thought. Someone once told the president of Miami Christian College, "The trouble with you is you are always asking for money." And this was his reply. "You are probably right. But let me tell you a personal story.

"I had a little boy; my firstborn. He was a delight to our hearts, but he was always costing me something. He needed clothing, shoes, food, and had special needs for which I gladly provided. Then, one day, he died. And He does not cost me a dollar now.

"Every need is an unfailing sign of life and growth. Body, mind and soul have their needs, and they must be met continually. A ministry that is constantly in need of funds [and here I would add, or volunteers] is alive, and . . . going somewhere. A dead ministry has no need, and will not bother you."

We Always Make a Difference. If that difference is helpful, the influence of our lives will be felt by a great many people in a great many ways long after we are gone. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them" (Romans 12:6)