

Sermon
May 28, 2023

1 Corinthians 12:3b–13

“All Gifts Are Needed”

Let us pray.

*Holy God, send your Spirit to blow through us this day. Enliven our bodies that we may serve in the Body of Christ as you have called. May we see the gifts in one another that all work for the coming of your kingdom. In Christ’s name*, **Amen**.

Almost 6,000 high school youth are waiting to be let in the doors. Are they waiting for a Taylor Swift concert? No. Are they waiting to get into a basketball game? No. These students are at Presbyterian Youth Triennium, and they are waiting at the doors to go into worship. (Pause).

When the doors open, these youth from around the United States and delegations from other parts of the world will rush in to get seats in the front of the auditorium and get ready to worship.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Presbyterian Youth Triennium has been held every three years since 1980. Unfortunately, in 2022, due to the ongoing pandemic, the health and safety of all who are a part of Triennium was a priority and the event was canceled. All of the material that had been prepared was made available and many presbyteries and other groups used the material for retreats and gatherings. While not the same as gathering with thousands of youth from throughout the United States as well as global delegates, it was a way to continue to reach out to the youth in the PC(USA).

Worship at Triennium is crafted with youth in mind. Worship is energetic and engaging. The preachers talk to the youth and not at them. There are opportunities throughout the week for youth to reflect on the theme and engage in service projects to help build disciples. Youth share ideas with one another and with adults around them. For many youth, this is mountain top experience, and when they return home, they are energized and filled anew by the Holy Spirit. However, when these same youth return home, energized and ready to engage in the community, what do they return home to?

In many churches, children and youth are seen only on Youth Sunday, Children’s Sabbath, when the youth or children’s choir sings, Palm Sunday or the children’s message. The rest of the time, children and youth are separated from the congregation in a model that has become known as the “one-eared Mickey Mouse,” identified by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster in their book *The Godbearing Life.[[2]](#endnote-2)* This means that children and youth are sent to age-based programs and these members of the community do not worship with the adults.

The Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka references this model of youth ministry in his 2013 article for Next Church, “Children’s Church is the Church.”[[3]](#endnote-3) The church began separating out children and youth in the 1950s, and over the past 60–70 years, we have forgotten how to worship as one community. And in so doing, we have not fully been the body of Christ.

As Paul writes to the church at Corinth, he is reminding them that they are all part of one body. As the people of the community argue about who has more gifts or which gifts are the best gifts, Paul reminds them that all the gifts that are given by the Spirit are equal, and all the gifts are necessary. The Spirit gives the community the gifts that it needs to do the work to which God is calling.

We need to be reminded of this as well. Gifts given by the Spirit are for the good of the community and are all needed. Gifts are given to individuals to be shared with those around them for the good of the Kingdom of God. Yet, many in the church have set boundaries as to who can share their gifts with the church when we leave children and youth out of full participation in the community.

Children and youth bring energy, laughter, creativity, curiosity, joy and a fresh point of view, along with gifts that Paul speaks to in his letter to the church at Corinth. I have heard adults complain about children who wiggle and make noise. And every time the adults do this, we send the message that children are not welcome, that children are somehow less important that adults. We send the message that they are not part of the body of Christ.

But there are glimmers of the church at her best. There are churches that do welcome children and all of whom God has created them to be. There are places that embrace the noise and the wiggles. And there are adults who take children and youth under their wings and nurture the gifts that they have been given. Music directors who encourage young musicians to offer their gifts in worship. Worship committees that regularly have youth serve as liturgists in worship. High school youth who have learned to operate the AV equipment on Sunday mornings or high schoolers who volunteer to teach the younger Sunday school classes.

Mr. Larry and Ms. June sat down the pew from a family with three young girls. The youngest, Mary, was 6. Mary would open her father’s hymnal and tear small pieces of paper to use as bookmarks. Larry started holding his hymnal out toward young Mary. Her eyes lit up when she realized Mr. Larry wanted her to mark his hymnal, too! Week after week this continued. Mr. Larry and Ms. June became like grandparents to Mary. They would ask her about school and followed her throughout her high school athletic career. They found a way to make young Mary feel seen, loved and valued.

At a church in Austin, Texas, a first grade girl, Jenny, was befriended by a couple in the church. Charles ushered each week and Jenny loved to help him. One day, Jenny skipped down the aisle with the offering plate next to her leg and she proudly helped collect the offering and walked forward with Charles for the Prayer of Thanksgiving. After a few weeks another young girl, Lori, wanted to help as well. The two young girls helped to collect the offering and carried it to the front for the prayer. During the prayer, one of the plates tipped forward and the money clattered and scattered on the chancel steps. The prayer went on and the girls quickly picked up the money and returned it to the plates. They continued to help usher and more children gradually joined them.

[*Insert your own story about being mentored as a child or youth]*

 *When I was in eighth grade, the Christian Educator at my church saw leadership potential in me. While I was in high school, Sandy had me helping with Vacation Bible School and summer day camp and encouraged me to use my talents as a high school athlete and as a musician and to share them with younger children. With VBS, I started off helping teachers in a classroom but after a couple years I was leading recreation and one day when the storyteller didn’t arrive, I told the Bible story at the beginning of the day.

When we had day camp, there were about 15–20 high school and college counselors. We led Bible study time, we taught various sports, we cheered for the kids, we led singing at lunchtime.*

*She helped us with things, but she also trusted us to lead. Through college and into the beginning of my teaching career, I stayed in contact with Sandy, and she continued to encourage me to use my gifts to serve within the church. I have no doubt in looking back that she was part of why I am in ministry today.*

The Pentecost Offering is an opportunity to focus on children and youth. It is a time to focus on the gifts that they bring to the body of Christ. The offering supports Presbyterian Youth Triennium as well as programs for children. The offering also supports the Young Adult Volunteer program, which allows young adults to serve in one of a variety of posts around the country and around the world.

The Apostle Paul writes that all gifts are for the common good and we are all part of the body of Christ. For centuries children and youth were part of the worshiping community instead of being relegated to another program. It is time for the church to open ourselves to the gifts the Spirit has given.

To paraphrase Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

There are many different gifts, but all from the same Spirit. There are many ways to serve, but we all serve the same Lord. All gifts are for the building up of the community. There are gifts of wisdom and knowledge, gifts of healing and prophecy, gifts of creativity and insight, gifts of joy and laughter, and gifts of speaking and singing. All gifts are given by the one Spirit and all gifts are needed to build up the body of Christ.

Children and youth are the present of the church. We need their gifts, and they need our love and support. We are all part of the body of Christ and only by working together can we work to bring about the Kingdom of God.

*Prepared by the Rev. Karen Wright, bridge pastor, John Knox Kirk, Kansas City, Missouri.
Digital theologian,* Faith in the Cracks*.*

1. [flickr.com/photos/triennium/4814647664](https://www.flickr.com/photos/triennium/4814647664/) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Dean, Kenda Creasy and Foster, Ron. *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*.
 Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN. 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [nextchurch.net/childrens-church-church](https://nextchurch.net/childrens-church-church/) (accessed March 30, 2023). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)