

**Message: Use your gifts for good**

**The words of Paul’s letter to the Philippians rings in my ears.** I’ve heard it over the past couple of months, this week and as we gathered this morning. Paul’s words express what’s in a pastor’s heart for the people who are closest; those who gather to praise God and follow Jesus.

**Listen to the passage again:**

*“I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I’m thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it’s always a prayer full of joy. I’m glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you first believed it until now. I’m sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus. I have good reason to think this way about all of you because I keep you in my heart. ... God is my witness that I feel affection for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.*

*This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God”* (1 Philippians 1:3-11).

You ARE in my prayers, whether gathered here in person or connected through the internet. I pray for God’s Spirit to open your heart and mind.

**We’re beginning a journey to discover our unique spiritual gifts.**

It’s a good study for the season of Lent, which is a time of spiritual preparation and reflection. Our journey is one of discovery. To guide us on the journey, we will use some guideposts to help us. They form an acronym, S.H.A.P.E, which stands for **S**piritual Gifts, **H**eart, **A**bilities, **P**ersonality and **E**xperience. The acronym we’ll use is one Rick Warren developed. As we go, you’ll explore our spiritual gifts by asking questions.

**Today, our question is, “What God has supernaturally gifted you to do?”** God gives you supernatural gifts through the Holy Spirit. That

begins when the breath of life, a divine spark, enters you. Paul said this to the congregation in Corinth, *“Brothers and sisters, I don’t want you to be ignorant about spiritual gifts”* (1 Corinthians 12:1, CEB). Spiritual gifts are an important part of our make up. God didn’t create us and the just set us loose to find our own way. God gives us spiritual gifts. And, when we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit when we’re saved, those gifts are fully activated. We’re supercharged!

**All of this has a beginning.** It begins with God’s love. You are God’s gift. You are made in God’s image. You’re made for a unique purpose. You’re valued and loved. In fact, the language used is that of artistry. Paul wrote, *“We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago”* (Ephesians 2:10, NLT). You’re a gift to us. You’re a gift to your family. You’re a gift to our community and world. Discover your gifts and live, fully and completely.

**We ALL have spiritual gifts.** No one is left out. Paul teaches us *“God’s gifts and calling can’t be taken back”* (Romans 11:29). There’s no gift receipt. Paul also tells us, *“We have different gifts that are consistent with God’s grace that has been given to us”* (Romans 12:6). The image used is the idea of an instrument. If a person who has never played a violin were to pick one up and try to play it, the result wouldn’t be pretty. Yet that same violin will give sublime, moving music in the hands of a master. We are all given gifts, but we aren’t all used to using them. It takes time, practice, patience, lessons and experience to gain fluency and, eventually, mastery. Best of all: the Holy Spirit is prompting, guiding and powering us every step of the way!

**What is a spiritual gift?** A spiritual gift is a special ability given by the Holy Spirit so you can serve others and strengthen the body of Christ.

**A spiritual gift is not a role.** For example, when you read Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he says, *“[The Holy Spirit] gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers”* (Ephesians 4:11). These are roles. For example, I serve as your pastor, but I do so with other spiritual gifts. All gifts have the same purpose: *“to equip*

*God’s people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ”* (v12). Whether you’re an usher, Sunday teacher, custodian or counter, your spiritual gifts make a difference.

**Spiritual gifts are specific.** They include the spiritual gifts of administration, craftsmanship, communication, discernment, encouragement, evangelism, faith, giving, helping, hospitality, intercession, knowledge, leadership, mercy, prophecy, shepherding others, teaching and wisdom (1 Corinthians 12, 14; Romans 12). If you take the spiritual gifts assessment we’re making available to you, you’ll get a sense of how you are gifted. I encourage you to take the assessment at home this week. Have your children take it. Then think about it. How do you feel about your spiritual gifts? We’ll continue on our path of discovery next week.

**Now I must speak to a matter that God has laid upon my heart and yours.** The role of pastor is to be one who cares for the flock, but that’s not the only role. Pastors are also called to be those who serve as heralds, speaking words of truth for the body to hear, even when they are painful. We are at the beginning of the season of Lent, which is a time of repentance and confession. It’s a time when we are called to wrestle with the mystery of sin. It’s a time when we ask for forgiveness.

**We need forgiveness.**

**You see, when tragedy strikes, we wonder why.** That’s what I thought, right after “oh no, not again!” God doesn’t tell us why seventeen innocent children were allowed to die at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. God doesn’t tell us why fourteen others were injured. God doesn’t tell us why the attacker did what he did. We don’t know why evil exists and seems to have free reign. We don’t know why it seems like God is silent. In fact, there are times when God’s own prophets say, “God where are you? You seem to be silent.”

**I want to offer two words to you this morning as regards that tragedy.** The first is from an email titled “Solidarity in Suffering” from

Rev. Corkey Calhoun, senior pastor of Georgianna United Methodist Church in Merrit Island, FL.<sup>1</sup> Rev. Calhoun offers these words,

“The Bible tells us that the enemy comes to steal and destroy, but I want to assure us all, that the enemy does not get the last word. Psalm 34:18 reminds us, ‘*The Lord is close to the broken hearted and rescues these who are crushed in spirit*’ (NLT). I think broken hearted and a crushed spirit adequately describes what many of us are feeling right now, but I also know the Lord is close!

Rev. Calhoun was in contact with pastors and leaders he knows in Broward County, where he serves as a chaplain. He pledged his congregation’s commitment to stand in solidarity with Parkland as they suffer the violation together. He says, ‘Prayer is what binds us and allows to us to enter the pain of one another.’ So he asked his church family to be in prayer for the Parkland community, as they begin the long journey of grief. ‘May the God of all comfort, hope and peace greet the victim’s families with each new hour.’”

**I offer the same invitation to you.** May we, as a community of faith, commit to be in prayer for the Parkland community as they begin their journey of grief. Lord, may they find peace at the end of that long journey.

**There are no easy explanations for what happened.** I urge you to join the families and community in sorrow and lament. We should. That’s what it means to have compassion. It’s the way to heal. I am available if you wish counseling or would like to talk about what to say to your children.

**The second word I have to offer is best described as outrage.** Sin is a word that we don’t like very much. It’s not popular today. We don’t like the idea of judgment. You know how that conversation goes, “If we’re good and we live to the best of our ability, then how can we be

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<sup>1</sup> [https://churchleaders.com/news/319418-say-sunday-address-recent-school-shooting.html?utm\\_source=cl\\_specialupdate&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=cl\\_specialupdate-&utm\\_content=button&mpweb=256-5980954-742703036](https://churchleaders.com/news/319418-say-sunday-address-recent-school-shooting.html?utm_source=cl_specialupdate&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=cl_specialupdate-&utm_content=button&mpweb=256-5980954-742703036)

sinful?” Paul tells a hard truth, “*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23). And “*the wages sin pays is death*” (6:23).

**When we do sinful things, we're seeking death, not life.** Sin is more than the wrongs that we intentionally do. We sin when we don't do the good that God calls us to do, made us to do and gifted us to do. When we fail to stand up for and protect those in our care, we're acting sinfully. As a society, as neighbors and as Christians, we failed the children in Parkland, FL. We failed them in the same way we failed the children of Columbine High School, Red Hook Elementary and dozens of other schools across our country.

**Let's face it. We're in love with our culture and it's killing us!**

Mass shootings, school invasions, the opioid crisis and other events are on the increase and they're part of the American culture of death. We accept them as the price of our selfishness lifestyles. If that wasn't true, we would seek to change. We would repent. But we don't. We're in love with violence and we're in love with ourselves. And so we lie to ourselves. We think we're in control when we aren't.

**Here's a little evidence.** All of us like movies. I went to the web site [www.moviebodycounts.com](http://www.moviebodycounts.com) and learned the following (note: I excluded war movies):

<u>Movie</u>	<u>Body Count</u>
▪ Lord of the Rings 3, 2	836, 118
▪ Titanic	307
▪ Pirates of the Caribbean	90
▪ The Chronicles of Narnia	86
▪ Star Wars IV, VI	75, 69
▪ Raiders of the Lost Ark	84
▪ Ironman	30
▪ Slumdog Millionaire	8

This doesn't take into account first-person shooter video games, which my 7- and 9-year old nephew and niece play, or any of the zombie movies and TV shows.

**Here are some sobering facts.** “Since a gunman killed 20 first graders and 6 adults at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012, more than 400 people have been shot in 239 school shootings! There have been 18 school gun violence incidents since the beginning of 2018. On average, there have been five school shootings each month.”<sup>2</sup>

**Repentance starts with me. I need to repent of my participation in the culture of death. I call upon you to do the same.** It’s only when we do the hard work of repentance and seek forgiveness that we can begin to do the hard work of taking a message of life in Christ to others. The message of life must stand against the death cult we live in.

I close with words by Jenny Rapson, who is a Mom and an advocate. She challenges us with: **“What are we giving up for Lent?”**

**Let’s give up, as a country, as a nation, let’s give up WHATEVER IT IS that is keeping us from protecting our kids at school.**

Let’s give up WHATEVER IT IS that allows people armed with assault rifles and shotguns to keep coming into schools time and time and time AGAIN to MURDER our children and their teachers. *Let’s give THAT up.* Let’s identify that thing and then let’s LAY IT DOWN on the altar and sacrifice it so NO MORE CHILDREN have to DIE.

Is it the easy accessibility of guns? Is it access to ammunition? Is it fear of or lack of money to put an armed police officer at the front door of every school, every day? Cause I’ll contribute to that salary. I will GIVE BACK MY TAX REFUND to protect the lives of our children. Listen, I’m not saying any of THESE things is THE solution. I’m not sure what it is. *But can we START TRYING to find one?* Because it doesn’t seem like we’re even TRYING to talk about a reasonable ROADBLOCK to put in the way of a homicidal person in search of some easy targets.

I’m not trying to ‘be political,’ I’m trying to make sure MY CHILDREN DON’T GET MURDERED AT SCHOOL. Because if you wanna kill a bunch of people, I know where you can find a crowd of people who are unable to fight back or defend themselves. Five days a week.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/02/15/us/school-shootings-sandy-hook-parkland.html>

Please, pray for the victims’ families. And then ask yourself what YOU are willing to do, what YOU are willing to GIVE UP so that you are not soon one of them. Five years ago it was 20 in Connecticut, and nothing has gotten any better. This week it was 17 more in Florida. Today and tomorrow, who knows? Jenny adds, ‘I’m really glad my kids don’t have school (on Monday).’<sup>3</sup>

**James tells us “*faith without action is dead*” (James 2:26).  
Lord, forgive us for our sin.**

### **Jeremiah 18:1-6 (CEB)**

Jeremiah received the LORD’s word: Go down to the potter’s house, and I’ll give you instructions about what to do there. So I went down to the potter’s house; he was working on the potter’s wheel. But the piece he was making was flawed while still in his hands, so the potter started on another, as seemed best to him. Then the LORD’s word came to me: House of Israel, can’t I deal with you like this potter, declares the LORD? Like clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in mine, house of Israel!

### **Philippians 1:6-11 (CEB)**

This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://forevermom.com/family-parenting/17-more-florida-school-shooting-jenny-rapson/?utm\\_source=cl\\_specialupdate&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=cl\\_specialupdate-&utm\\_content=button](https://forevermom.com/family-parenting/17-more-florida-school-shooting-jenny-rapson/?utm_source=cl_specialupdate&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=cl_specialupdate-&utm_content=button)