

BE OUR CHURCH - SHAPING COMMUNITY

Ordinary Time

1 Peter 4:8-11a

A Sermon Preached by
Pastor Catherine Foote and Beth Amsbary
University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

1 Peter 4:8-11a¹

Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of mistakes. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the abundant grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.



Pastor Catherine Foote

Prayer:

God, speak through our words
God, open our hearts to hear
for you are our rock and our strength.
– Amen.



Beth Amsbary, singing

Hand clapping and percussive stomping
Let our hearts not be hardened to those living on the margins
There is room at the table for everyone.
This is where it all begins. This is how we enter in.
There is room at the table for everyone.²

Pastor Catherine Foote: 1st Peter and the Early Church

It turns out today's sermon text, this one from 1 Peter, is actually the text from the first sermon I ever preached. Somewhere in my files I have a copy of that sermon. I actually remember most of it anyway.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament [adapted], ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

² Carrie Newcomer, "Room at the Table," from album *A Permeable Life*, 2014. Information accessed 8/22/2018 from <https://www.carriewcomer.com/store/a-permeable-life>.

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I was in college, a small Christian college down in Southern California, and that college had an annual sermon contest. This was the early 1970s. And so when I heard about this contest I thought, "Well, I'm going to enter." There were two categories of awards. The first one was for the written sermon. The second one was for the preached sermon in chapel. And so I went to work.

I wrote a sermon on this topic, this title given to us: "God's Gifts for God's Glory." There I went: three points and a bad poem by Rod McKuen. A sermon much too long for this congregation, but I felt just right for the college I was a part of.

Here's another thing about that sermon contest in the early '70s and about that little college. They taught there that women shouldn't preach. So I was the first woman *ever* to enter that sermon contest. [*Cheering. Catherine: "No. No. No. ... No. ... No. No. No. That was just me! Come on. You all know me."*]

Well, women could be missionaries, sure.
Women could be teachers.
Women could even marry preachers.
But women couldn't preach.

There I was, my first sermon, "God's gifts for God's glory." And, in the written contest, which was judged anonymously, I got first place. [*Cheering. "Yes!" replied Catherine, chuckling.*] In the spoken contest where it was revealed who was saying what, I don't know if it was my delivery – the first sermon I'd ever preached, after all. I was the guys who took the preaching class, not the women. And; so maybe it was my delivery, maybe they just couldn't hear it from a woman – I got third place. Actually I was kind of happy with that.

Here is what I realize after all of these years, "God's Gifts for God's Glory," the foundational premise: every one of us has a gift. Every one of us is called to share that gift. Unless you don't fit quite in the category from whom we wanted to receive the gift.

Beth Amsbary

Some of you might have noticed that my partner, my husband James, doesn't come to church on Sunday. And I've noticed that some of *your* partners – your wives, your husbands – aren't here either. In other cases, it's absent children or maybe parents.

I have to admit that on some level this puzzles me. I mean, who wouldn't want to be here? Right? It's *awesome!* ... Aah...Right? [*Clapping. Catherine: "This is a clapping sermon, I guess." Laughter.*] The richness of thought here. The well of spiritual sustenance in every season of life – for me, the low tides as well as the high tides. The relentless pursuit of how can we be more just in our own lives, and with this community and in the broader society. The music! And the art... The creative expressions of spirits! Oh, my gosh, and your rich souls. This is community!

And yet ... Well, Oh! Oh! So, the image that this scripture evokes for me of this is of a steward presenting this rich, huge platter that is laden with delicious spiritual gifts, which we place and we share with each other.

(Beth lifts an imaginary platter toward the congregation like a classy waiter)

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Who wouldn't want to be at that table, right?

And yet for my James, this table does not nourish him. For him, it would be like a steak-and-potatoes guy going to a vegan potluck. Although James is vegetarian, actually, so it's inverse. But you get the idea.

And so, he supports us. He's willing to help out. Some of you may know that he built the mechanism, the fly system that lets Kris Garratt hang wonderful art back there. He conceived the idea of the little drop lines from which the banners are hung. But for him to come be part of a story this not sacred for him, "No, thank you," he asked me to say. "No, but thank you."

If I am to truly honor the authentic, very honest man that James is, I have to honor that he, too, has put deep thought and discernment into evolving a system of ethics and personal responsibility, of forming community and an ontological construct.

For me to say to him, "You know, I know you've thought all of that through really carefully, but really, you just need to come with *me* to my place and do *my* thing at *my* church." Wow. So disrespectful, right?

(Lifts a platter with right hand)

I would be taking his amazing platter of gifts ... Pteew,

(Throws platter down).

Because really, *my* platter of gifts that I share with all of you is *much* better *[said smugly]* *[laughter in audience]*.

(Lifts a platter with left hand – much higher up).

So, instead, what James and I get to discover is how we both honor each other's gifts

(Lifts up 2 platters in 2 hands ceremoniously high)

And sometimes we do that discovery with joy and ease. Sometimes it requires a little more work. Sometimes we do it by letting each other each do our own thing ...

(Pull platters apart)

... especially on Sunday mornings.

And sometimes we have done it by very mindfully constructing these alternate tables where we share together.

(Platters together & lifted)

(Singing with clapping)

Too long we have wandered burdened and undone.

There is room at the table for everyone.

Let us sing the new world in. This is how we enter in.

There is room at the table for everyone.

Catherine:

So we come back to today's text. The letter of 1st Peter was written in a time of turmoil, when questions of community were running deep. *Who* belongs here? *Who* is part of this circle? And *who*

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should be left out? When the early church was beginning, those questions of community were crucial. And whether or not Peter actually wrote this epistle, it's good to put his name on it, because we know Peter himself struggled with that. It was Peter, after all, who according to the Book of Acts had that marvelous vision of food coming out of heaven that he had been taught all his life not to eat, and the spirit of God saying to him, "Take and eat." And "What God has called holy, do not disregard."³ And it was Peter after all, according to Galatians written by Paul, Peter was the one who, once the table was set, wasn't sure he could step into the newness. He's the one who pulled back.⁴ And so we have this letter in the name of Peter that suggests every one of us has gifts. Every one of us has gifts. I am looking out at a banquet. *And* every one of us *needs* gifts. Not one of us – *not one* of us – has every gift we need. Peter is trying to tell his community: recognize, value, hold onto this weaving, this interdependence. It matters.

Beth: Our evolving call for spirituality

Five years ago, Sarah Turner and I began wondering and having conversations. Many of you remember Sarah. She and her husband David were wonderful members of our community who moved away about a year ago. But those of you who sit in the back on the right, you remember their amazing singing, right? And the rest of us can remember their amazing commitment to justice and worship and llamas, too. (They had a llama at their wedding here.)

So anyway ... Sarah and I would have these conversations at coffee shops all over the Central Seattle area. We were meeting with people and asking them, "What do you yearn for in a spiritual community?"

We heard about honest and authentic sharing & friendship.

We heard about a sense of the sacred that weaves through everything.
Everything! Everything! What a wonderful world.

We heard about sharing practices, about doing stuff together,
rather than passively receiving.

And we saw tears and we heard people saying:

"I *yearn* for a place where I can enlarge my spirit. Where I can talk about the spiritual life and without people looking at me like I'm crazy. And ... I ... I can't do that in a room with a big cross on the wall. I just *can't*. But I want some kind of connection. I'm looking. And I'm having a hard time finding it."

Tears.

These conversations began because of the work of the **Rev. Lisa Domke**, who is a member here. Thank you, Lisa, for starting these conversations. Lisa heard the yearnings of people like our tearful friend, and Lisa wondered, "Maybe we could have another community, friendly to this community, but another table where there ..., another community where there would be another kind of a table, where people like our tearful friend could enlarge her spirit, could share and be shared with. So with the support of this amazing church, Lisa launched **Simple Path**, which is an emergent church

³ See Holy Bible, New Testament (op cit), Acts 11:4-10.

⁴ See Holy Bible, New Testament (op cit), Galatians 2:11-14, in which Paul rebukes Peter ("Cephas").

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community that is amazing. What a sense of generosity! And then a few years later Simple Paths evolved into what's called **Spirit Workshops**. Spirit Workshops is this church's program for the *Spiritual but Not Religious*. Wow! What faith that we could have a bigger way of sharing our gifts.

Oh, man! Spirit Workshops, it's this group which I am so honored and humbled to help lead along with Catherine. And there is so much we are still discovering. There is so much information. And yet there is this *mysterious* power that is growing out of those gatherings. Consistently, consistently, it's just *demanding* to come into the world.

The quality of listening in a Spirit Workshop gathering at is *so intense!* Our scripture today talked about *speaking*, as if you are speaking the very words of God. But in our Spirit Workshops gathering what I am seeing is people are *listening* as if they are hearing the *very words of God* – coming from each other's hearts.

The people sitting in our circles have pretty divergent beliefs. And yet Holy Spirit is leading us in ways to be with each other with practices, so that there is this platter where we can hear and honor all of these different gifts that are being shared. And together we can behold them with this sense of awe and discovery. Sometimes ... Yo ... This gift is sacred to somebody. It's not my story, but it's really powerful for them. And there is something about hearing and participating in each other's words that is opening. I am a better person for sitting in those circles and deeply honoring others. I am hearing that from others, too.

One of our regular attenders says, "I come here because this is the place where I am truly seen."

You are creating a place where divergent people feel truly seen.

Lisa, thank you for launching us on this Simple Path.

Singing

It don't matter who you are. It don't matter where you've been.

There is room at the table for everyone.

Here and now we can be the beloved community.

There is room at the table for everyone.⁵

Catherine – Back to 1st Peter

All of this takes me back to that first sermon I preached. Very different from this one. I had to leave that community. But I didn't leave without their gifts. And I don't leave disparaging them. I leave grateful that for one moment we shared our gifts together. And now I bring gifts to share with another community that will bring gifts to share with [yet] another community.

The deep irony of that text, of that idea that we all have gifts to share, is an irony, I think, that goes farther than even Peter himself could realize. It is *not* just about this spiritual community flourishing because we know the *only* way, the *only* truth, the *only* life: It is about *recognizing and honoring* our way, our truth, our life, *deeply* honoring our story, and then *opening* ourselves up to hear other stories, as well. Stories that will puzzle us, stories that might be hard to hear, and yet stories that can

⁵ Newcomer, op cit.

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make us whole. When spiritual communities flourish, *this* spiritual community flourishes. Every one of us has a gift we need to share. Every one of us have needs that other people's giftedness can fill. God's Gifts for God's Glory.

Singing

There is room for us all. And no gift is too small
There is room at the table for everyone.
There's enough if we share. Come on pull up a chair.
There is room at the table for everyone.
There is room at the table for everyone.
There is room at the table for everyone.⁶

[Amen]



UCUCC: CF + BA

Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from <https://universityucc.org/resources/sermons>
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⁶ Newcomer, op cit.