

WHAT YOU BRING **I CORINTHIANS 12:1-11**

It is what it is. Have you heard that expression? That particular colloquial expression has worked its way into our culture over the last decade or so. It is what it is. Expressions that we use say something about the times in which we live. Take this expression, “It is what it is.”

That expression suggests to me that our culture has taken a fatalistic point of view over the last decade or so. It’s as if the housing crisis of 2008, the rising political discord, the realities of economic inequality and wage stagnation, the opioid crisis, and rising civil disorder have turned us into a nation of Eeyores.

As I thought about this, I remembered that my parents were members of the greatest generation. My Father was in the Navy during WWII. They had a very different point of view, and they had a different expression to go with it. They lived through both the Great Depression and World War II and rose above those events to create the most powerful nation in history. That experience led them to coin a very different expression that better reflects their view of the world. They used to say, “Life is what you make it.”

I don’t know if any of you have noticed, but both my life and my ministry are in a period of significant transition. There are a number of factors that have led to this transition, which I won’t go into right now. Suffice it to say that things are changing for me. I want to talk about the direction of ministry in particular, because it affects how I minister.

In the past, I have focused largely on what I was doing for Jesus, and asking you to focus on the same thing. After years of this I have concluded that I have largely neglected spiritual growth and the practice of spiritual disciplines. A seed will not grow if it’s planted in barren soil. This change in perspective colors everything I do, including how I might interpret the passage in front of me.

In the past, I would have looked at the passage in front of me, and said something like this, “See, you have spiritual gifts. Just look! It says so right here in the bible. So, what you need to do is figure out which of these gifts you possess and utilize them in the service of the Lord.” I guess I believed that doing things for God would lead to spiritual growth. I’ve come to conclude that it just isn’t that simple.

So, if that’s not how I’m going to interpret this passage, what do I make of the passage in front of us? What does any of this have to do with spiritual gifts? I could go through the gifts listed here, talk about what they are, and tell you that you need to discern what those gifts are. That’s problematic because discerning our gifts, or for that matter discerning the will of God, requires a deep and abiding relationship with God. Without that, we may even doubt that we have any spiritual gifts, much less be able to discern what they are.

Before we can answer the question, “What are my spiritual gifts?” we have to answer the question, “How can I discern my spiritual gifts?” Before we can answer that question, we have to answer the question, “Is my faith deep enough to discern anything the Holy Spirit is doing?” If the answer to that question is no, then the obvious question is, “How can I strengthen my faith? How can I get into a closer relationship with my Lord and Savior?”

So, let’s take that question and wrestle with it for just a minute. Growing our faith can be a difficult journey. I know because it has been for me. The truth is for a long time I gave up hope that my journey of spiritual growth would ever lead anywhere. I tried everything I could to strengthen that relationship with Jesus Christ. I tried different forms of prayer. I tried spiritual retreats. I tried daily readings of devotionals and daily scripture readings. Sometimes, I would make a little progress for a short period of time, but nothing ever really lasted more than a few days. I came to the conclusion that it is what it is.

What I didn’t realize was that there were stumbling blocks in my path that inhibited my walk with Christ. I didn’t realize they were there. As a result of them, my growth stagnated and never really progressed. I was never able to discern God’s will adequately- I was never able to do it- because I was never able to focus on God’s will. I was too focused on myself. Eventually I just gave up and said, “It is what it is.” I became a spiritual Eeyore.

Another way to answer the question of how to strengthen our faith, is to answer it with, “It is what you make it.” I can convince myself that if I’m just devoted enough, if I just stick with it long enough, my faith will grow. If you’re not feeling it, fake it until you do. Fake it until make it.

When we were living in Jackson, Barbara worked with a number of Doctors. One of them was riding in a car with his little girl one day. His little girl, said, “Daddy, Eeyore is very sad, isn’t he?” He said, “Yes, honey. Eeyore is very sad.” The little girl thought about it for a moment, and sighed and said, “I guess Eeyore just doesn’t trust Jesus.” The little girl was on to something. Some people approach spirituality just this same way. If we just trust Jesus, if you stick at this long enough it’s bound to work.

The problem with that line of thought is that it totally disregards the agency of the Holy Spirit. Spirituality is relationship, and relationships are always two-way by their very nature. They are always two way. They are never just what one person makes them to be.

I want to propose a different formulation. Our relationship with God is what it grows to be as we overcome our resistance to God. I have to be careful here. One of the theological bases of our faith is that we are not saved by our works. Salvation is a free gift of God’s grace. I want to reaffirm that doctrine here. I’m not talking about our salvation being dependent on anything other than the grace of Jesus Christ.

However, what I do want to suggest is that our relationship with Jesus Christ includes, but is not limited to, the saving grace of Christ. We can take comfort in the grace of Christ, that

saves us without condition- that meets us, as the hymn says, "...just as we are, without one plea." Our salvation has nothing to do with what we do. Whether that salvation leads us to grow emotionally and spiritually or remains an abstract concept that we don't think about and we won't understand until after death, really has a lot to do with us.

Let's be clear. It isn't a journey we take alone. We have to allow Christ to take the journey with us. Otherwise, it won't work.

You may wonder how I got all that out of this one passage. The truth is, I didn't- I took the liberty of going off on a little tangent. I chose to view this as an image of what could be rather than what is. The reason I did that is to make a point. There is so much more waiting for disciples of Jesus Christ than just a set of pearly gates. There are things that God has blessed us with and gifts that we have been given that we're barely able to understand at this point.

I want to ask a question for you to think about. Isn't there just some part of you that's curious? Don't you wonder what gifts you've been given? Don't you wonder what's in store for you? Don't you wonder God created you to do? You can find out. But you have to bring something along for the journey. You have to bring a willingness to engage Jesus Christ. You have to bring a willingness to face the pain in your life that has been keeping you stuck. You have to bring a willingness to be yourself- your TRUE self. You have to see yourself the way that God sees you, and not the way you want everyone else to see you. When you do that you inevitably discover your gifts, and when you inevitably discover your gifts, you have to bring a willingness to use those gifts for the glory of God.

Your relationship with God isn't what it is; it isn't what you make of it; it's what God makes of what you bring to it. If we just open up and let God in, God will make something beautiful of what we bring. I want to encourage you to trust God. Let go and let God! I think you'll be amazed at what you can do with what you bring.