

Activation Energy & Spiritual Gifts: A sermon for Epiphany 2, Year C (1 Corinthians 12:1–11)

I wonder if Epiphany is easier in the southern hemisphere. “In your light, we see light,” was the phrase from this morning’s psalm that stuck with me all week. But this *matra* had to be almost purely metaphorical, since, until yesterday, Metro Washington seemed to have been transported to the Scottish Highlands, or maybe San Francisco in the summer. Short days, overcast skies, and regular blankets of fog interfered with our season of light. I’m guessing my colleague who traveled to Grahamstown, South Africa, this week had no such difficulties.

The gloom is distressing because it’s hard to *be* what you can’t see. Epiphany is about uncovering, about revelation, about enlightenment. We asked in today’s collect that we might “shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory, that he may be known, worshipped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth.” It’s hard to turn our spiritual imagination to the ends of the earth when we can’t even see to the end of the block.

But all literalism aside, there are real questions for us here: Can we believe right now that each of us, personally and corporately, manifests the divine light? And in particular, is that light a light for the *whole world*? Have we been *empowered* by the love of Christ incarnate and the baptism we share with him? Have we been equipped to serve God and one another in his name?

This morning, our patron saint responds with a resounding *yes*. This passage from 1 Corinthians is one we study often here at St. Paul’s, but to hear it during Epiphany is to discover the full force of its proclamation: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the *manifestation* of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4–7).

*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit.* Despite our doubts, Paul asks us to trust that we have been shown and given what we need to be a light to the world; God has put that light within us. Sometimes we hide it under a bushel basket, but that is not its purpose and not our destiny. Our vocation is to shine, to become an ever-more-transparent window around the light of Christ within us. The potential is already there inside, yearning to be made manifest.

Adding to the beauty of Paul's portrait is that the light shines differently in each of us, through a variety of gifts, services, and activities. Regarding that last word, in particular, our translators have been very clever. To say that there are "varieties of *activities*" and one God who "*activates* ... them" signals to us that *activities* and *activates* translate words that share the same Greek root: ἐνεργέω (*energeō*), from which we get our word "energy." *Energeō* means "to be operative, be at work, put forth power" or "to *display* one's activity, *show* one's self operative."

So there's a sense here both of work and of witness, of doing but also demonstrating. We might paraphrase that there are "varieties of works" but "the same God visibly at work in them," or maybe "varieties of passions" but "the same passionate Spirit as their source and significance." So to shine is to get caught up in the work of the Spirit by discovering and using the Spirit's gifts. And because those gifts are varied, the process of their discovery and growth in us will look different for everyone. But let me take a stab at describing the process, with an analogy that I think Paul's word choice supports.

You might remember from high school chemistry that certain kinds of reactions do not take place immediately upon mixing two ingredients. These transformations need a little kickstart, a boost of heat called activation energy. Often, it's the flame of a bunsen burner that provides this requirement and activates the change to come. But whatever the source, some reactions simply will not take place without it. Yes there's potential, but there's also a barrier that must be overcome.

So I think about this concept when Paul talks about *energeō*, about spiritual gifts that God will activate (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:11).

Some of our gifts don't seem to require activation energy at all; God has given us the potential for a particular kind of work, and it bubbles and spills out into our lives like baking soda and vinegar mixing in a model volcano.

You probably know a lot about the spiritual gifts God has given you in this manner. They might be useful for the work you do every day, and they're almost certainly on display as a light to others in your ministry at St. Paul's. For example, the members of the choir, among many others here, have been given musical gifts. Most of them probably learned this at a relatively young age and have been shining in this particular area of service for years.

Some gifts, though, are still waiting for God to give them that little boost, and in many cases we increase the energy required through the chill of our own fears. For many of us, hospitality is a challenge in this way. I myself have often used as an excuse my shyness or fear of looking stupid or desire to avoid rejection. I let myself off the hook for introducing myself to someone, or learning more about them, or extending to them an invitation to church or some event.

And yet at a few points in my life, I believe God has really needed me to welcome a particular stranger in a particular situation. And so I've been given in those important moments, and I bet you have too, the activation energy to overcome the barriers that are a natural part of us and the barriers we have contributed through sin. I hope in those moments that the light of Christ has indeed been made manifest to the people we have encountered.

Let me extend this analogy just a little further. I believe God has given us another, complementary path of spiritual growth: The Spirit has called us into community here and elsewhere, and in community we encounter catalysts. Catalysts, you may recall, lower and sometimes remove the activation energy required for a certain reaction. So too can our

transformations be aided by the people and situations we encounter in community. They catalyze us, lowering or even breaking down the barriers to our fuller discovery and exercise of the gifts we have been given. It is not always an easy process, though.

Again, hospitality may be a telling example: the person who recognizes in us the potential for offering welcome and asks us to join in some new role can be just the catalyst we need, helping speed up a process of spiritual maturing that might have taken much longer otherwise. To be accountable to a community is to be challenged grow in the Spirit.

I spent the week before last living at Richmond Hill, a convent-turned-ecumenical-retreat-center in Virginia's capital. Richmond Hill is run by volunteers and by ten or so house residents who make a 3–5 year commitment to the ministries of hospitality, racial reconciliation, educational reform, and thrice-daily prayer for Metropolitan Richmond. I don't believe I've ever seen a more potent catalyst. You see it in the web of relationships among the residents, between the residents and the wider community of volunteers, between that community and city, and between this whole matrix and the visitors who show up at their door for retreat.

In my week in Richmond, I was challenged and I hope changed by the residents in particular. Each one makes discernment of the Spirit a priority in their own lives and shares this gift with those they welcome and listen to so intently. If you visit there, and I hope you will, you'll see the way their community shines for the city they serve, catalyzing change that manifests the reconciling love of Christ in classrooms, housing projects, council meetings, churches, coffee shops, and individual relationships. It is a sight to behold. As is any place where the Spirit is at work among the faithful—including St. Paul's, K Street.

In this season of manifestation and light, and in the seasons to come, I hope we too can be on the lookout for signs of our individual and corporate gifts, especially the ones we have not yet discovered. I pray that God will provide the appropriate nudge in the moments when we need it. I pray that in our attentiveness to each other we can be catalysts for spiritual growth

that will bear much fruit in this parish and in our communities. If we are faithful to this process, we can't help but be a light to the world, no matter what the weather, and no matter how we are called to serve the common good.