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Limited Discipleship  
Psalm 100  
1 Corinthians 12:3b-13

To speak of limits in America is almost to commit some sin against the ideals of our country. We pride ourselves on being a world without limits. We want unlimited minutes on our phones, unlimited miles on our rental cars, unlimited credit on our shopping trips, and unlimited options to achieve, earn, and advance. Limits seem antiquated. We like to hear: *You can be anything you want to be. You can go anywhere you want to go. You have no limits.* Unfortunately, a world without limits is destructive. The best parents wanting to equip their children for success, happiness, and prosperity set limits from an early age—how late can you stay up, how much TV can you watch, how much sugar can you consume? Limits are good. Limits are healthy. Limits are necessary. Having no limits in childhood, in marriage, in the workplace, or in the world is destructive. But on the day of Pentecost when we celebrate the powerful, equipping, limitless movement of the Holy Spirit, is talk of limits an anathema?

The Holy Spirit came to the earth with wind and flames and noise and makes all things possible, right? The Holy Spirit came to remove all barriers, right? The Holy Spirit's motto is "No Limits," right? Not quite.

This familiar reading from 1 Corinthians speaks of a variety of gifts the Holy Spirit gives to God's people: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, speaking in tongues. This is not an exhaustive list, but a sampling of the kinds of the ways the Holy Spirit equips people for service. Paul begins by saying ALL are equipped by the same Spirit and the gifts are given for the sake of the common good. All are equipped but with different gifts. Immediately, the Holy Spirit is limiting us. We are limited by the gifts we have been given. Some of us may have more than one gift or a combination of gifts, but none of us have all of these gifts. We all have our limits.

You might have the gift of great faith, but your confidence to share your faith might be low. Or you might have the gift to simplify complex theology and lead great bible studies, but put you at a hospital bedside and your hands get clammy and you stammer your words. Or you might have great wisdom and counsel to offer your friends and colleagues, but your ability to balance a budget is lacking. In the season of Pentecost, we celebrate how God has come to us in the Holy Spirit in power and in might, but also with limits and restraints. Thus reflecting the nature of God's relationship to us.

Thomas Currie writes, "Pentecost's limits are a sign of the church's true freedom (and holiness), a confession that we have not made ourselves, but that "we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture."(Ps. 100:3) Our God is not a distant God, shining love and blessings indiscriminately on all people. This is not a bland, "God Loves Everyone" banner at a march on the mall for whatever the cause of the day seems to be. Rather God loves you and knows you and has equipped you particularly. God loved Abraham and equipped him with the gift of perseverance. God loved Sarah and equipped her with the gift of joy. God loved Moses and equipped him with the gift of leadership. God loves us particularly, specifically and has given us ALL gifts, different gifts, to be used for the common good.

Some of you may have taken Gallup's self-assessment Strength Finders Test. Gallup has divided up human strengths into 34 categories like Empathy, Learner, Developer, Harmony, Positivity, etc. After you complete the assessment it gives you your top five strengths with their descriptions. The theory is that all of us do better if we know our strengths and work on our strengths. Many of us have focused on our weaknesses to round ourselves out, bring up our lowest grades, overcome shortcomings but Strength Finders thinks we would do better if we simply tried to master our strengths and leverage our unique gifts. In church speak, this is being humble enough to know your limits and faith filled enough to believe God knows you and has given you individual, unique and important gifts with, which you are called to serve.

Mark Twain once described a man who died and met Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. Knowing that St. Peter was very wise, the man asked a question that he wondered about his entire life. He said, "St. Peter, I have been interested in military history for many years. Who was the greatest general of all time?" St. Peter quickly responded, "That man over there." "You must be mistaken," responded the man, "I knew that man on earth, and he was just a common laborer." "That's right my friend," assured St. Peter. "He would have been the greatest general of all time, if he had been a general."

This is sort of like realizing that at 5'4" you are never going to play professional basketball so quit the team, quit the practicing, quit the summer camp and know your limits and focus on your strengths. It's the tone-deaf person finally quitting the choir. It's the numerically challenged dropping chemistry and picking up another English lit class. Know thyself. I actually considered a mechanical engineering undergrad program because my father said we needed more female engineers—man, would that have been a failure! Figuring out who we are, what gifts we have, and figuring out how best to leverage them for the common good is the call of the Christian in the season of Pentecost. We have been through Christmas, we have celebrated Easter and now it is time to figure out how we should serve. The gifts we have been given are precious, unique, and needed for our families, our churches, and our nation.

Paul in this passage emphasizes that our gifts are given for the common good and so our gifts come with a responsibility. First, we have to figure out what they are and then we need to leverage them for the sake of one another. The Spirit has equipped and the Spirit has limited. It has equipped us in order to serve each other and it has limited us so that we must depend on each other.

I am grateful to the lawyers who have the patience to pour over minute details of documents and cases. I am grateful to the teachers who care for children and nurture and love our youngest as their own. I am grateful for accountants, tax experts, finance wonks for wielding numbers like putty in their hands. I am grateful for the people who have gifts in the areas where I am completely inept—engineers, software designers, scientists, and how about plumbers, mechanics, or electricians, right?!?! God's infinite wisdom diversifies our gifts so that working together we can be the body of Christ, each with our limits yet collectively powerful.

Limits can be very freeing. We realize we do not have to be all things to all people. We do not have to be Jack-of-all-trades. We can just be our best selves. Being our best selves is our

calling as disciples. When Jesus called to Simon Peter and Andrew as they were casting their nets into the sea, he said, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” These guys were good fishermen, equipped with all the gifts you need to catch fish—strength, patience, and persistence. Jesus says—I can use that stuff for the sake of the kingdom. He did not say follow me and I will make you bakers, carpenters, or scribes for the kingdom. Jesus says—I can work with the raw material of a gifted fisherman and use it for the common good, “I will make them fishers of men.” The natural strengths, interests, and talents that God has given us can be mobilized for the sake of the gospel and the sake of the common good.

All of us have gifts. All of us have been given these gifts by the same Spirit. All of us are called to use these gifts in service to our God and our fellow man. “Do not hide your light under a bushel.”

The Pentecostal proclamation is that we are all radically limited in our abilities and talents. And so we are humble. We are all remarkably gifted and equipped. And so we are empowered. Our limited discipleship fits beautifully together in service to the common good. So find your gift and then put it to work because the rest of us are depending on you.

Amen.