

# **The Totally Excellent Way**

**Sunday, January 17, 2016; 1 Corinthians 12:31b-13:13**

Ken McGarry

---

Good morning. Let me tell you about the first time I experienced the “speaking in tongues of men *and* angels.” I was 18 at the time, a freshman at a Christian college in Colorado, and attending an evening Bible study session at the church of a young woman that I had recently begun dating. I don’t remember what the topic of the study was, but I do remember quite clearly what happened at the conclusion of the session. The leader of the group announced that we would close in prayer. We all stood up, gathered in a circle, and held hands. The leader prayed aloud while group members responded with a quiet chorus of “yes, Lords” and “thank you, Jesuses.” And then one of the members began to pray quite loudly in a language that I had never heard before. Another also started speaking in some angelic tongue and then another, until only I and young woman who had invited me to join her group were the only ones not speaking in tongues. It was one of the more uncomfortable moments of my life and it was our last date.

I have since become friends with several other people who exercise the gift of tongues, including one of my dearest friends who is a minister of the Assemblies of God Church, a Pentecostal denomination that believes that speaking in tongues is a sign of the full presence of God’s Spirit and that being unable to speak in tongues is a sign that one does not enjoy the full presence of God’s Spirit. While I don’t subscribe to this theology, I do believe that God has gifted certain individuals to offer these ecstatic utterances in prayer and that these are for them legitimate expressions of their faith.

I bring up the topic of the gift of tongues this morning as a discussion on the topic is the immediate context of today’s scripture lesson from Paul’s First Letter to the Church in Corinth. First Corinthians 13 is oftentimes read at weddings, but the context

of this chapter is actually quite different than a situation where people are lovey dovey or making nuptial vows. While it talks about love, Paul is not referring to romantic love in any way. His letter to this church was written to address several important issues and problems, and here the issue being addressed is the church's practice of speaking in tongues and usage of other spiritual gifts.

The church in Corinth was a church in conflict. We know from First Corinthians that there were a variety of different groups in the congregation that saw themselves as separate from the others and superior to them. Some claimed to be disciples of Paul, some claimed to be disciples of Peter, still others followed Apollos, a dynamic preacher, and others claimed to be disciples of Christ alone. Individuals and groups expressed their superiority over others by their use (or more accurately, misuse) of spiritual gifts, especially that of speaking in tongues in their gatherings. In their services of worship, people offered uncontrolled, ecstatic expressions to demonstrate their deep connection to God through the Spirit. Some would speak in tongues that others could not understand; others would offer prophetic words. Their voices, however, were not used to benefit the congregation or to glorify God, but rather to glorify the speakers before others.

Paul writes to teach them that these gifts are not to be used for self-exaltation; they are given so that others may be served and built up by them. And so he offers them some instruction on the totally excellent way of exercising their gifts: They are to be offered *to* others in love, not the warm-fuzzy kind of love or the romantic kind of love, but the self-sacrificing, lifting-up-others, forgiving kind of love. They are to be exercised, sometimes at great cost, to build up others and therefore the whole church. This is the most excellent way to live in the community of faith. It was for the church in Corinth and it is for the church in Wilton. We need to not only recognize our connection to God through God's indwelling Spirit and the ways that God empowers us, but our calling to use this empowerment to serve others so that God may give gifts to others *through* us.

Are you aware of how God may give to others through you? If you have not done so already, I encourage you to take the spiritual gifts test that can be accessed from the main page of our church website. The test only takes a couple minutes to take and you will receive the results immediately. After taking the test, please email your results to Anne so that she has a better understanding of the giftedness of our congregation. To make it really easy for you, we will have laptop computers set up in Pilgrim Hall during coffee hour today and for the next few weeks, so if you'd prefer to take the test while this is fresh on your mind, you can do so while slurping on your post-service coffee. Not a bad deal, right?

The test will help you to understand how your unique giftedness fits into some of the categories mentioned in the Bible. However, it is by no means a comprehensive assessment of how God has gifted you or how God wants to work through you to serve the church and the world. Anne has mentioned that each of you has at least one gift; I will take it even further and say that you are *all* gifted in *many* ways. I believe that God's Spirit has been breathed in to all of you, young and old, tongue-speakers and non-tongue-speakers, that you may serve God and others in many meaningful, loving ways.

One of the problems with people is that we are often unaware of the many ways that we have been empowered, leaving our spiritual gift cards in unopened envelopes in the mailbox. We also often realize the ways that we are blessed, but we do not employ our giftedness, depositing our stack of unused spiritual gift cards in a drawer. Friends, the reason you have been so richly blessed by God is so that you may recognize these blessings and then use them so that others may be blessed.

This weekend we remember one of our Christian brothers who serves for us as a good example of how to let ourselves be used by God in meaningful, loving ways. Martin Luther King offered his prophetic voice to lift up others, calling out for a blissfully oblivious society to pay attention to its own injustice.

His message was offered out of love for others, and it was used powerfully by God to push people to change their minds and actions so as to bless—and not curse—the world.

Maybe you have not been given the gift of prophecy, but how have you been empowered by God to bless the world? What have you been given to give our community of faith? And what sacrifices will you make so as to lift up others?

I had a conversation earlier this week with one of our church members who is considering sending her child on our upcoming summer youth mission trip to Gulfport, Mississippi. The parent was concerned because her teen is a bit shorter than average, and was wondering how her child would be able to help on a worksite. My response was to point out that on every work project we need somebody to paint the low spots! A paint job that covers only the top half of a house isn't much good. The *whole* house needs to be painted, and for that to happen, we need both our taller students *and* our shorter students to serve as they are able.

Such is the case with spiritual gifts. None of us are the same. None of us are equipped by God to serve in the same way. When we work together, all using God's unique spiritual equipment, people will be effectively served and God will be glorified. If we withhold our service, because we think that we are ill-equipped or otherwise unable to enact change, we do a disservice to God and those God has called us to serve. So let us give boldly. Let us give in love. This is the most excellent way. Amen.