In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon text for this morning comes from our Epistle Lesson, 1 Corinthians 12. St. Paul is writing to that conflicted, fussing and fighting congregation in Corinth. He writes this:

4Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:4-7, NRSV)

When I am old and all is said and done and I think back to my years in New York City, one of the most beautiful sights I will be able to recall is simply the Communion rail here at Immanuel Lutheran Church, with all our people receiving the Blessed Sacrament. There are varieties of gifts among our people, but they all come from the same Lord and the same Holy Spirit.

St. Paul makes this point when he is writing to his congregation in Corinth. He is trying to promote more peace and unity in that congregation. It seems that some people there were bragging and lording it over others in the congregation, because they claimed that they had higher spiritual gifts than the humble members of the congregation. And the humble folks there were probably discouraged because their gifts seemed to be of little account, compared to the spectacular gifts of others, and perhaps they feared that they themselves were less important in the church than the highly gifted people. Not so, writes St. Paul. You have all been nourished from the same source, from God himself. You are united and you are honored not according to the majesty of the spiritual gifts you receive, but simply from the reality that each of you has been blessed by God for the upbuilding of the church. You are honored and united by the holy Hands from whom you have received your spiritual gifts.

And so St. Paul is trying to calm the conflicts in that early Corinthian congregation. But that is not what I am on about in this morning’s sermon. My goal is not to talk about conflicts but simply to talk about the beauty of this congregation and of our city and of our world. Our congregation is made up of people with lovely spiritual gifts. When you all are kneeling at the Communion rail, I look at you with admiration. I am grateful for the gifts that God has given to each one of you, and I am grateful for how you make our congregation strong. Likewise, I believe that our God has blessed our town
and our world with a lot of talented and gifted people. I know that there are daily frustrations in life, but in this sermon I would like us to step back a bit and to regard our congregation, our town, and our world with admiration. God has given us much beauty—beauty not only of field and forest and meadow and mountain, but also beauty of soul. Let us pause for a while, then, to admire the gifts given to our world by our God.

First, let me speak of the gift of prayer. Each one of you can pray. You can pray for yourselves, for our congregation, for our work, and you can pray for me. I will be very grateful for your prayers. Regardless of your age, education, wealth, or honor in this world, you can all pray, and our world will be better off because of it.

In our Monday Evening Bible Class, we are studying Luther’s Large Catechism nowadays. Most recently, we have been studying the Lord’s Prayer. Luther multiplies the reasons for prayer, arguing that prayer is not optional for the Christian. His first reason for prayer is simply that God commands us to pray. We could point to the words of Jesus:

Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7, RSV)

And we could remember the counsel of St. Paul:

Pray without ceasing. (1 Thessalonians 5:17, KJV)

Luther himself refers to the Second Commandment: Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain (Exodus 20:7). Luther believed that whole-hearted obedience to this commandment requires that we use the holy name of God as God intends it to be used—which includes that we should call upon God in prayer.

So, Luther speaks of the Second Commandment. And then he makes a point about the spiritual dignity this gives to each person who prays. The command to pray works a great democracy and unity among us. Luther writes this:

We allow ourselves to be impeded and deterred by such thoughts as these: “I am not holy enough or worthy enough; if I were as righteous and holy as St. Peter or St. Paul, then I would pray.” Away with such thoughts! The very commandment that applied to St. Paul applies also to me. The Second Commandment is given just as much on my account as on his. He can boast of no better or holier commandment than I.

Therefore you should say: “The prayer I offer is just as precious, holy, and pleasing to God as those of St. Paul and the holiest of
saints. The reason is this: I freely admit that he is holier in respect to his person, but not on account of the commandment. For God does not regard prayer on account of the person, but on account of his Word and the obedience accorded it. (Luther, Large Catechism, Kolb/Wengert)

It is the same with all spiritual gifts. People in our congregation and elsewhere too vary in the gifts God has given them, but the gifts of any of us are equal in holiness to the gifts of the rest of us — not on account of the gifts themselves, but because of the Giver of the gifts. The Lord has neglected none of us. As our opening text says:

7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7, RSV)

As St. John Chrysostom put it,

...even if there be a difference in the gift, yet is there no difference in the Giver. For from the same Fountain ye are drawing, both thou and he. (Chrysostom, homily on 1 Corinthians 12)

This Sunday, today, happens to be our regular winter Voters’ Assembly here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. This is the Voters’ Assembly when we elect our congregational leaders for the coming year. That is probably why I am thinking so much about the spiritual gifts in our congregation. Our congregational leaders here at Immanuel are radiant with gifts of the Spirit. They have loving hearts, they have skills of analysis, they are eager to win souls for Christ, and they have ideas about how to serve Christ.

And then, along with our congregational leaders, we have every worshiper in this congregation and the various wonderful ways in which each of you make our church stronger. There are many roles to be filled in our congregation and various forms of work that needs to be done, from the Altar Guild, to serving as Greeter or Usher or Presenter, to posting hymn numbers, to singing in the Choir and in the pew, or serving as Lector or Communion Assistant, or bringing treats to Coffee Hour, or working at church bazaars, or taking part in Bible Study classes or being friendly to new people in our congregation or simply giving a smile to the children or to anyone in the church. Even quiet, or solemn, or even grouchy people are precious people in our congregation. They are part of who we are — they have been led here by God, who wants us to enjoy each one.

And behind all the various gifts people share in our congregation are the individual lives you all live and bring with you to church. For some of you, life is pretty easy and this past week has been good. You come to church with
strength in your bodies and in your spirits. For some of you, life is hard and this season of life has been difficult, and you almost have to drag your poor bodies to church. But here you are, and you help make our congregation beautiful and strong. St. Paul says that to each of us, God has given spiritual gifts. The apostle says so in this morning’s text:

7To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

In fact, to each of us, the Lord has given the highest of spiritual gifts. I mean love. It is as St. Paul puts it:

So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13, RSV)

The love for others you have shown here at Immanuel makes our congregation strong and lovely. It is the same with the love you will show going forward, for years into the future: the gift of love God has given you will help make this church a beautiful place.

In this morning’s Gospel Lesson, Jesus performs a miracle of extravagance. He supplies a huge supply of wine for a wedding, and it is fine wine. St. John emphasizes that this is the first of our Lord’s miracles in John’s telling of the Gospel. This first miracle is a sign of the overwhelming goodwill of our God toward our world. So it is with the spiritual gifts that God pours out upon earth. He has blessed our congregation and our world will many good gifts and talents.

Was Beethoven a believer in Christ? I do not know. I hope so, but I am not sure one way or the other. But I am sure that our God has blessed our world through the gifts he gave to Beethoven, to Michelangelo, to Dostoyevsky, to Sir Isaac Newton, to Einstein, to Shostakovich, to Mother Teresa, to Michael Jordan, and on and on. Our God has not left the cupboard bare when it comes to talents and gifts on earth. He did not bring us into a world bereft of his gifts. And so, let us step back from the daily frustrations of life and try to remember that we are part of a great adventure on earth: we are part of the church and we are part of humanity. We are surrounded by people with true gifts from God. Let us try to take our place firmly among the people of God’s good earth, and try to lend our own gifts to the upbuilding of the church and the blessing of the world, in the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.