

“Grace-Gifted for Service”
Julie Bergen’s Ordination
Osler Mennonite Church
March 5, 2017 by Eileen Klaassen

Each person is uniquely created by God. Many years ago, in fact, when I was a child, I can remember learning in Sunday School that each person is as different as the leaves on a tree. In keeping with the season, we could use snowflakes as an image – however, we might prefer to think about leaves!

I want to talk today about the uniqueness of individuals and how that plays out in the life of a Chaplain, as well as in the lives of believers.

As a Hospital Chaplain, I often think of this image when I visit with patients .– Although there may be some similarities in feelings, each life story truly is exclusive to that person, and I find that to be quite fascinating!

As Chaplains, we hope to draw out the uniqueness of each patient, and offer whole-person care – so that each patient is more than a diagnosis or a room number, but a person with a name and a family WITH UNIQUE responses to surgery or an illness.

For many people, what we do as Spiritual Caregivers is a mystery. I recently attended the symphony, where I met a nurse with whom I have worked, off and on, for the past 10 years. She introduced me to her friend as “Eileen Klaassen who works in Pastoral Care”. Now this nurse, I know, sees me as being a religious person, and assumes that my role is to walk into a room, pull out my Bible, read something uplifting, say a prayer, and walk out.

I had no choice but to gently correct my nurse-friend about the role of a Spiritual Care Provider in a healthcare setting. No wonder there is confusion! As a profession we don’t even know what to call ourselves. Are we Hospital Chaplains, Spiritual Care Providers, Spiritual Care Associates, or Spiritual Care Practitioners?

Sometimes I explain spiritual care as being like asking, “How are your spirits today?” which can bring up responses of discouragement, fear, or feelings of loneliness or abandonment. Our job is to listen, to validate, and to offer hope. In a family meeting, when asked to explain spiritual care, I once used the image of the triangle, saying spirituality is about relationships. Relationships with our self in light of the illness, relationships with others as roles change and as each family member or friend reacts in

their own way, and relationship with God, to whom we look for protection and care and blessing, and with whom at this point we might be very angry. As I explained this image, and particularly the possible changes in relationship with God, the patient and his wife nodded with understanding.

As I said, each person and each story is different. Some patients recover quickly, others may stay in hospital with little hope of any recovery at all. There are patients with complications, and others with an unexpected worrisome diagnosis. Some have supportive families, some dysfunctional families, and too commonly, some have no families at all.

So often, patients will note at the end of a visit “I did all the talking! What did you come to tell me?” I assure them that my primary role is that of a listener, someone to hear them put their experience into words. Years ago I read that our service comes not so much from what we profess to believe, as from ourselves being well-grounded in our faith, from having integrated our beliefs and our life experience into who we are. And that is what we bring to patients and families, as well as to staff, when we meet with them.

One wise elderly Hindu man I visited – a man who I discovered knew as much about Christianity as I did, after a delightful time together, noted, “Ah, you are a listener; a disciple” – and for me he brought to mind the image of Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet.

One of our newly diagnosed palliative patients, told of the work he had done, overseeing many workers in the construction business, and said he felt good about the way he had always tried to treat his workers fairly and with compassion. A few days later this man died unexpectedly, and I felt honored to have heard what we call his “life review” – looking back at his life with a sense of accomplishment and no regrets, which he was able to do because someone was there to hear his story.

I have met many people who assure me straight off that they are not religious, and of course we honor that, which occasionally means the visit is over – but more often than not, it can lead to an interesting discussion. One man recently told me quite gruffly that he wasn’t “religious”, but then launched into a story of what I would say was a vision he’d had, where part of that vision included seeing the room light up with a very bright light. “Now I know the Lord is with me,” he said – and I felt I had borne witness to a holy moment. He proceeded to tell me that he had only told the story to a few people before, and they hadn’t believed him. Then he admitted, “And this is the first time I ever told it to a preacher!” That was not the time to inform him I don’t work as a preacher. It was a

time to marvel at God's grace in being there to validate his experience and assure him that indeed, the Lord was with him.

There was the man who was paralyzed after a motor vehicle accident. Talk about a life-changing experience! But clearly the change for him was also spiritual as he told of a near death experience in which he saw Jesus. "I was never a Christian", he tells me, "That was never important to me, and now I can't describe Jesus to you, but I can tell you that the feeling of love and peace is one I will never forget." After many months of therapy which proved to be only somewhat successful, I wondered whether he still felt the same about that experience. When on our last visit before his discharge, he reached out his hand I knew he had something significant on his mind. "Eileen," he said, "all this was worth it. Yes, I am now paralyzed, but it was worth it – because I saw Jesus!" And all I can do is share his story as he asked me to, and to be amazed!

As you can likely tell, I could fill the hour with stories; I could tell story after story of experiences in the life of a Hospital Chaplain – stories which at times leave me amazed, and at times leave me pondering a significance that only God knows – but grateful for the diversity of individuals that makes life so interesting!.

I hope this gives you some insight into the work that Julie has been doing and which I hope she can continue to do for a long time. **Julie brings a unique sensitivity to her work**, with her caring spirit, her peaceful presence in what can be a tense and sometimes anger-filled situation. It takes the heart of Christ to visit some folks, and Julie brings what might be called courage to go places many would not dare to go. More than courage, she has the Christ-like compassion to meet with patients I myself haven't dared to see. Although there are times when it seems I was just the right person to connect with a certain patient out of my life experience and because of who I am, there are other times when I know Julie was certainly in the right place at the right time. She brings her wisdom, and the knowledge she has acquired not only in her Chaplaincy studies, but also the knowledge acquired as a Social Worker, as a Doula, AND a Mother and all which that entails. All this provides a unique background of experiences which inform and impact her work as a Spiritual Care Provider.

Each of us has been uniquely gifted by God. However, we may hesitate to claim our gifts; sometimes we downright fear the path where using them might lead, because God always invites us to go deeper.

Sometimes we use our gifts – but it's so easy for our egos to get in the way. We may be tempted to take credit ourselves for what we are able to do, rather than acknowledging that our gifts are a gift of grace; they are grace-gifts from God. Or we may not feel

worthy of having received our gifts, and determine that others are so much more gifted. "Comparison," said Theodore Roosevelt, "is the thief of joy."

Sometimes gifts have been too narrowly defined. We may take particular note of gifts of speaking, praying, teaching or writing, which are all more intellectual gifts – and value them more than the gifts of those who use their hands, such as working in the trades or working as artists, yet all these gifts can be used for God. Like the patient who had worked as a supervisor in construction, the grace may come through in their honesty as a tradesperson or in service following a disaster. It may come through a pot of soup for a bereaved family or in creating beauty in worship. The grace may be in the gift of hospitality and I think of the woman who completely refreshed the role of usher for her church, and it became more than the role of just passing the offering plate; it became an offering of friendliness, kindness, and welcome.

God didn't give one person all the gifts, but instead decided to spread them all around to remind us of our interdependence on one another. Even this sermon was one which I talked about with several friends. Here was the challenge: preaching on the day of Julie's ordination, preaching to a congregation at a Sunday morning worship service, AND to top it all off, as it turns out, this is the first Sunday of Lent! I am grateful for gifts shared. We are interdependent on one another.

For many reasons, using our gifts can be a challenge, but we are - each of us - uniquely gifted – and only as we accept our gift does that gift hold meaning and significance. Paul says, "Only as you accept your part of the body does your 'part' mean anything." For God's expectation is that we use what we have been given, and use it in service to God.

Each of us has been uniquely gifted by God to serve God and humanity. Each person is given something to do that shows who God is, and the possibilities are endless! So God is intentional about gifting people and each gift has an intended purpose. When we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, a prayer that includes some of the most significant teachings, how does it start? After we say, "Our Father who art in heaven" and proclaim God's holiness, what comes next? "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

So how is that supposed to happen? How does the way of God's kingdom get worked out on earth? Perhaps through God's people? Through God's people working together as the church? And WE are the church, using our gifts to bring love and mercy into the world. And kindness. We can never have too much kindness! As a church we

encourage one another and bring hope – hope that God cares about each of us, about the church, and about the world. Hope that *in the end*, all will be well.

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church. When one person suffers, all are affected and suffer with them. As a caring community, I know you understand that full well. On the other hand, Paul says, “If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance.” Celebrating Julie's gifts and her ordination today, in the context of the church, is a great example of just that. And God is in the midst of it!

As I pondered this, I was reminded of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. This is what we bring into the world through our gifts. These fruits are evidence of God working through us, and while I myself smugly smiled my way through most of them, suddenly I was brought to my knees, as it were. Not all of these fruits are evident in me, nor in the way I use my gifts. In fact, I had to admit that some of those fruits are sadly lacking.

What do we do when we feel inadequate for the task? We can know that we are not alone; God is willing to help us. On the day I got a call from the Nurse Manager about an angry patient, saying "We've tried everything. It's time to pull in the big guns!" believe me, I was praying all the way up the elevator and down the hall! That day was one of many when I have experienced God's faithfulness as I was given divine love for this patient and the right words to say. In our inadequacy, and in our cry for help, God is faithful!

And, what do we do when we are convicted of trying to go it on our own, trying to use our grace-given gifts for our own good instead of the common good? That is when we humbly turn to God, knowing that our gifts only have significance and are in fact multiplied when we are open to God working through us.

Yet these feelings, too, are a gift, for they teach us to rely on God. And this is where Lent comes in. One of my friends reminded me that the purpose of Lent is to draw nearer to God and to become more like Christ. She added that, “Lent is a season of introspection.” So here we are, on the first Sunday of Lent, knowing that if we are to use our God-given gifts for God, then we are going to need some help from God. God is a God of second chances – and we can take this Lenten season to be filled, directed, and empowered by God's spirit

So here is our challenge, for this is the season to more closely discern our gifts, to examine our hearts – all the dark corners – and bring them into the light, knowing that

God's gracious love, as we read in the Psalm, is steadfast and precious, and that God truly is the fountain of life, the source of all meaning and purpose.

As we seek to be filled and directed by God's spirit, Jesus' life shows us that using our gifts always extends to our neighbour; where we are freed to show love without reservation. As we consider the uniqueness of each leaf and blossom of the trees, let us also consider the uniqueness of our God-given gifts and remember that the greatest gift is love –and it is this love that bears much fruit for the kingdom!

I would like to close with a few scripture verses written by Paul, this time to the Ephesians (4:1-6, NRSV), and I will follow that with a prayer in the words of St. Teresa of Avila.

I therefore, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Prayer.

Lord Christ,
You have no body on earth but ours,
No hands but ours,
No feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes through which your compassion
Must look out on the world.
Ours are the feet by which you may still
Go about doing good.
Ours are the hands with which
You bless people now.
Bless our minds and bodies,
That we may be a blessing to others.
AMEN