

October 2, 2011----Ephesians 4: 1-16, 1 Corinthians 12:12-26

Once upon a time a woman was hiking in the mountains. She was looking for a place to stay, a place where she could be useful, where she would know what to do, where she would feel at home.

She came to a place where the trail split off in three different directions. The sign for one path said, "Word." It was a well-worn path, but overgrown in places, and it curved only a little way ahead. It looked like it would require constant attention to what was around to be able to stay on the path.

The second path was marked, "Deed." This path was straight and clear, well-maintained and easy to know where to go, but it was very steep, with big rocks to climb over. It would be challenging to climb that path.

The third path was marked with a sign that said, "Sign". "Well, of course it's a sign," the woman said to herself! "But where does the trail lead?" It was a very unclear path, with tree branches hiding the trail at places, small bushes growing up in the middle of it, and when she bent over, she thought she even saw one of them on fire!

What was that about, and why would she want to go that way anyway?

She didn't want to stand there at the crossroads forever, so at random she chose the path marked "Word."

As the path twisted and turned along the way, she found people who told her which way the path went, and how to stay headed in the right direction. They were willing to answer her questions and explain things in ways that she could easily understand, things about life and God and how it all made sense and made a difference in the world.

She had found the teachers.

A little further on she found people telling others about everything that God had done in their lives and throughout all of history. They told her that God loves her and wants her to have peace and joy. They told of God's power and faithfulness and that God had created everything she saw around her.

And she recognized that these people were witnesses and evangelists.

Further along the path marked “Word,” she also met people who were explaining the meaning of everything and how to use that knowledge in daily life. They seemed to be very much in harmony with the heart of God. These were people of great wisdom and understanding.

When she went around the next bend in the trail, she found several groups of people. Some were talking quietly with one man, some were listening to a woman, two or three were huddled with another man, and there were several pairs of people, talking quietly one-on-one.

She watched for a few minutes, trying to figure out what was going on, who these people were. Some people were asking for direction on their journey. Some needed to rest and there was opportunity for that.

Food and water were given to those who needed them. Guidance was being given for the next part of the people’s journeys, and those who needed care of any kind received it.

These were the pastors, those who were shepherding the people, giving them strength and direction for their journeys, working with them here on the trail, in the course of their lives.

Along this trail she also met the preachers, who understood the bigger picture and were able to connect history and current events to each other, all in the context of God's love for the world.

As she continued on, standing at the side of the trail were the encouragers, who spoke to her, saying, "You're doing great! You're not alone! You can do this!" Sometimes they would walk alongside her for a while, just to encourage her to keep going!

When things got confusing and she didn't know which way to turn, people were there who knew all the twists and turns of the trail to help her make sense of everything that she had heard about God and about Jesus, so that her life would once again make sense. She was grateful for their knowledge.

The woman learned a lot on this trail. She appreciated all the help she had been given, but she found herself back at the crossroads somehow. As much as following the trail named "Word," there hadn't been any place for her to stay, no place where she really fit.

And so she stood at the crossroads and looked at the signs, "Deed," and "Sign." She looked down each trail as far as she could.

And she finally decided to go down the trail marked “Deed,” because it was broad and clear, and the one marked “Sign” looked so confusing!

So she started up the steep trail, clambering over the rocks and struggling up the mountain.

Her leg muscles began to burn and her heart pumped hard as her lungs gasped for air. And then people appeared all along the trail, taking her hand, steadying her, even pushing her from behind when she had a hard time getting up over a rock. They were the helpers.

Finally she got to a level place and stopped to rest. People with the gift of serving brought her a chair to sit in, a cup of cold water and a snack, a cold wet cloth to wipe the sweat from her face. Whatever she needed, they brought to her.

They gave her strength to go on, and she was still hiking when night fell. As it got dark and a little bit cold, people came to give her a flashlight and a jacket. They gave her what she needed and more, and she was able to continue to hike for another hour or more.

When it got late, a man and a woman guided her to their small cabin, fed her dinner, and let her sleep in the most comfortable bed she had ever slept in.

They knew the perfect balance of entertaining her and letting her have her privacy. They were clearly gifted with hospitality.

In the morning, she continued, and toward the top of the mountain she came out of the trees and into a rocky section of the trail. The trail faded among the rocks, and she paused for a moment, unsure of the way.

Immediately a man appeared beside her and went ahead of her. He seemed to be able to see the way clearly and that gave her confidence. He walked very serenely, with so much assurance, and she knew God had given him the gift of leadership.

As she started down the mountain on the other side, the path became clear once again and she was able to continue on her own.

But before she reached the bottom of the mountain, she caught her shirt on a tree branch and it tore badly. She stumbled on a rock as she caught herself and her shoe broke. Immediately, two people appeared out of nowhere. One gave her his shirt and the other gave her her own shoes!

These people had the gift of giving, and they gave to her sacrificially--
-things that they themselves needed.

They also had the gift of kindness, making sure that she was okay after her fall, talking with her until she was no longer nervous about continuing on. She had been a little shaken up and the trail ahead was very steep and she was anxious.

They let her know that the trail would very soon level out and they sat with her until she was ready to continue. Then they walked side by side with her, holding her arm when she felt unsteady, until the trail felt safer to her.

The trail wound around and around and pretty soon the woman felt very lost. She wanted to sit down and just stay where she was. She was about to give up and quit looking for the perfect place for her and just settle for staying where she was.

Just at that moment, though, a woman came by and found her. The woman told her that this was not where God wanted her to stay, that she belonged in another place. She told her to just keep taking another step and then another, one foot after the other, and it would all be worth the journey. This woman had the gift of faith, to be able to see God's will and share the confidence to do it, one action at a time!

And so our friend went on.

And as she went, she passed side paths with signs that said "Administration Office---Organization and Scheduling" and the next one said "Apostles---Christian Communities Formed and Raised," but administration and apostleship weren't what she was looking for, so she stayed on the main trail, eager to find her own place where she would truly belong.

As she came around a curve somehow she was back once again at the crossroads. She hadn't found where she belonged on the Word trail or on the Deed trail, so that only left one choice---the Sign trail. Off she started once again.

She had decided against this trail before because it was marked so unclearly and hard to follow. She didn't understand most of what she saw--- a bush that burned but did not burn up, a man with only a little food feeding a huge crowd of people, a man walking out of a tomb alive.

She felt like she had fallen down Alice's hole in Wonderland, and at each twist and turn she half-expected to find a huge caterpillar sitting on a mushroom, smoking a hookah and spouting incomprehensible poetry!

And sure enough, she began to hear voices, and the voices were speaking in languages she had never heard before! When she got to where these people were, she stopped and listened carefully, trying to recognize the languages they were speaking. She had never heard anything like it before!

And when she turned around, there were more people speaking languages that she did recognize, but she felt confused. They would change the language they were speaking from time to time as they spoke to each other, seeming to learn them from each other as they went along.

And so sometimes they spoke English, and she understood, but most of the time they were speaking every other language known on earth and then there was this other language that didn't sound like any earthly language at all!

Finally, a man came from behind a tree and approached her.

He asked her questions in languages that she recognized as Spanish, French, Vietnamese, German, and Italian. But she didn't speak enough of those languages to know what he asked, so she just shrugged her shoulders and asked "English?"

And then he asked her in English what her name was and if she understood what was going on. His questions and then his explanations were very dramatic, as if he were the lead in a play. His body language was exaggerated with broad gestures and pointing and even breaking into song from time to time.

He told her a lot about the entire trail, because even though this place was where he lived, he travelled the trail, speaking to everyone and helping others to understand no matter what language they spoke.

There were others with the same gift who were out on the trail right now, he told her, pointing very clearly in one direction after another.

He explained to her who the people were who spoke in languages she had never heard before, as well as the people who changed languages with ease, and then he told her who he was.

They all have the gift of speaking in tongues, he said. Some were praying in “the language of angels.” They don’t even understand what they’re saying themselves, but it brings them in close contact with God’s angels and God. It’s not about understanding, he said. It’s about the Holy Spirit.

As for the others, the way that their gifts of tongues work is to allow them to learn other languages easily.

As for him, he had the gift of interpretation of tongues. He could tell her what the people were praying for--- For world peace, for people who are sick, for your mother, for so many people it was impossible to name them all.

He could also interpret what everyone else was saying, too. He said he could understand any language after hearing it for a little while, and then with some study or more experience, he could speak it as well.

Our friend thought all of that was fascinating, but since she had always struggled to learn other languages, this was definitely NOT where she belonged. She asked him which way the trail continued and he pointed with a grand flourish and sent her on her way in a dozen different languages.

And she continued on, seeing miracle after miracle along the trail and thinking this was the most amazing trail after all, even though she couldn't make sense of a single thing!

And then she began to pass people who were limping and on crutches. She saw a group making their way through the trees who seemed very ill, thin and pale.

Some were being helped by other people because they were too weak or because they seemed so confused or agitated or because they were blind. In some, she recognized the symptoms of mental illness.

She wanted to help these people as she went along, but she was unsure of what to do.

Instead, she hurried along to find where all these people were headed.

She came out into a meadow and found a building that looked like a hospital, and in fact, that's what it was! Patients filled the beds inside and caring doctors and nurses and other medical personnel went from person to person, caring for them and helping them to get better.

And before she even thought about it, she asked the nearest nurse what she could do to help and was given instructions.

Before she knew it, she was working alongside the doctors and nurses, caring for the patients as though she had done it all her life.

She had found where she belonged!

She had the gift of healing!

People got better as she cared for them.

She had never been as happy or as satisfied before!!

And so the end of her journey was there, on the trail marked Sign.

She thanked God for leading her on her journey of discovery, and she thanked God for the gift of healing every day.

We all can find our place on one of these trails. And what this story did not make clear is the truth that most of us have more than one gift. Probably, in addition to healing, our friend has the gift of kindness, and maybe giving as well.

And so the trails of Word, Deed, and Sign interconnect and cross each other many times. We all have spiritual gifts. We will continue on our own journey of discovery for the next two Sundays and in our in-home studies.

It's exciting to know what gifts God has given to us! It is even more exciting to know how to use our own unique gifts for the glory of God in service to others!

Think about what your gifts might be. Think about what gifts you think others have. Part of discovering our gifts is to listen to what others see in us! Maybe we don't see them ourselves, but those who know us just might know!

Eyes open, hearts eager, let us continue on our journey of discovery!

Amen!