

“What’s Your SAT Score?”

I Corinthian 12:4-11; Mark 1:4-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio
January 13, 2016 – Epiphany Sunday – Rev. Ronald W. Botts

Each year more than two million high school students take the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Known as the SAT for short, this is a 3 hour exam to determine skills in mathematics, science, and language. A great deal depends on the results. It pretty well determines not only if a student will be able to go on to college, but where. Most universities have a minimum score for acceptance.

Some critics contend that too much rides on the outcome of this particular test, and that may be so. Yet its strength lies in identifying both the knowledge and aptitude that a student would likely bring to college work. It’s evident by the outcomes that test takers have great diversity. Some are better in certain areas than others. Not everyone is the same; not everyone has the same potential in every field.

Now recognizing the difference in people is not something new. It goes back to the very beginning of humanity. One who was keenly aware of this varied potential in people was the apostle Paul. In his catalog of natural gifts Paul also cites the SAT, but to him SAT would stand for "Spiritual Aptitude Test."

He says in his letter to the church at Corinth: "Now there are varieties of gifts ... varieties of assets ... varieties of work. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith ... to another gifts of healing ... to another the working of miracles, to another prophesy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues."

This list is not exhaustive, just long enough for Paul to make his point: that even in spiritual matters people have varying abilities and talents. Importantly, too, is that whatever gifts one might possess, they are always God-given and carries with them a responsibility. What we have is to be acknowledged and used.

Now when I was younger I aspired to be a novelist. I read the works of famous authors and thought that’s what I want to do. I desired to write stories that would grab the imagination of people. I wanted to create characters that would come alive for readers and show them both the best and worst in humanity. I longed to spin tales that would keep people on the edge of their seats. I wished to bring greater truths to light through engaging plots.

I was particularly drawn in college to two novelists. The first was Jozef Korzeniowski. In the fall of 1889 this Polish-born seaman was living in a flat in London. He was a veteran of eleven years in the British merchant marine, but was temporarily without a ship. One morning after breakfast he sat down at his desk and began writing about a man he had met earlier while on a steamship bound for Borneo.

He recalled later, "Till I began to write that novel I had written nothing but letters, and not very many of these. I never made a note of a fact, of an impression, or of an anecdote in my life."

The recollection that sailor put down on paper grew little by little into a novel and became his first published work. It was to be only one of many books to be written by this man and it's still read today. Writing under the name we're familiar with, Joseph Conrad, he is most remembered for the novel *Lord Jim*. This seaman discovered his gift largely by chance, but then dedicated himself to developing this skill.

The other author is Stephen Crane, an American who was helped and befriended by Conrad. Crane's approach to his talent was quite different from that of his colleague.

Stephen Crane discovered his gift much earlier in life. He was a success right from the start and had written two solid works by the time he was 22. Just a couple of years later he penned his most famous story, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and it became a best seller. This one book placed him among America's leading novelists of the time, alongside the likes Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain. And he was, by far, the youngest to gain fame; so, in many ways, he may have had the greatest promise.

Yet Stephen Crane seemed to be afraid of his talent. He lived a wild, irresponsible life. He married the madam of a brothel. He lived on the edge of life, often drunk and penniless. He continually exposed himself to danger and soon turned away from his success in fiction | to be a war correspondent. He failed to care for his health and died from TB at the age of 29. Interestingly, it was Joseph Conrad who sat by his side in those last fever-ridden days and proved to be a caring friend.

Here are two of the world's greatest writers, but they were different as night and day. Joseph Conrad recognized and developed the gift he had. Crane seemed to try to run and hide from his. Two contrary responses to natural talent. One man developed his capacity fully, but the other never achieved the full potential within him.

Well, I never became that famous author I dreamed of as a young man. What I discovered is that I just didn't have the stories within me that needed to be told. Reluctantly, and with some sadness, I had to admit that I just didn't possess the ability and imagination to go with my desire.

So, what does one do then? Well, you teach literature and composition which I did before I felt the call to ministry. Now I did learn an important lesson through all of this. I learned what I wasn't cut out to be. I learned to look in other directions for my natural inclinations.

Sometimes the paths we think are most important prove, in the long run, not to be the most consequential after all. We don't have to gain fame or fortune to find our place in the world. We can throw up our hands and stay locked in place, or realize that God has not left us without resources for other things to accomplish. Satisfaction ultimately comes from doing what we are equipped to do, and the pleasure of doing it to the best of our ability.

From Paul today I think we can learn two important lessons. The first is this: a person should identify his or her strong points and build upon them. It does no good to lament what you can't be, when you could be enjoying what you are able to do. It doesn't matter what your

mother or father or anyone else wanted you to be; they can't be you. You must find your own place in the world.

Each of us has many gifts, though sometimes we underestimate them. Quite often we compare ourselves to the ultimate successes in life and conclude that we simply don't stack up. Why try? Maybe you play a pretty good game of basketball, but if your standard is LeBron James, forget it. Perhaps you sing well, but not contrasted with Taylor Swift or Placido Domingo. We don't have to be the best at something to be good at it. There is no one born who doesn't have aptitude for something.

Some gifts we use in our vocation, others we use in the rest of life. The challenge is to find what is uniquely ours and make of them what we can. We shouldn't be stymied by the skills we don't have, but instead should be thankful for the ones we do.

The second point that Paul makes is that an ability is a tool and not a trophy. When it comes to spiritual gifts, there is no room for boastfulness or arrogance. While we can feel good about a gift, it should be cause for humility and not pride. As Paul puts down his list of gifts, he indicates that all of them are just that—gifts, gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In a church, for example, each gift realized by its members is needed for the good of all. Especially in a small congregation, like ours, we all have to step up where there are needs. We saw evidence of that again last week when we installed our new classes of Deacons and Elders. There aren't that many things we can't do when people are willing to use the natural abilities given them, and to develop them to the fullest.

There isn't one of us here who doesn't have some ministry of service to perform and the ability to accomplish it. Even the simplest of gifts may prove to be a blessing. I'm not particularly bothered by being up in front of people, so that's a gift when it comes to leading worship. Some people can draw. Some people can sing. Some people can keep financial books. Some people can repair equipment. Some people are great visitors with shut-ins. Some people can lay out a great fellowship table.

So, what's your SAT score, your Spiritual Aptitude Test score? Well, it may just be a lot higher than you think. The bigger question, however, is "Now what are you going to do with what you have?" And that, my friends, is largely up to you. That choice, God has given only to you.