

Sunday, November 19, 2023

Matthew 25:14-30

"God-Given Gifts"

The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

There is a story told of a man who died and went to the gates of heaven. The gatekeeper said, "everyone who enters heaven must have earned at least two hundred points while he or she was on earth." "I shouldn't have too much trouble with that," said the man, "on earth I was a faithful member of my church for sixty-two years, and during that time I contributed thousands and thousands of dollars to the programs of the church." "Well," said the gatekeeper, "That's very good and all that is worth one point." "Alright, I've done more," continued the man now a little irritated. "I was a faithful husband, a dutiful father and an honest businessman. In addition, I helped with all civic and charitable projects in my community." "Very good," said the gatekeeper, "all of that is worth another point; now you have two." Now desperate, the man exclaimed, "if that's how things are here, then the only way I'll get into heaven is by the grace of God!" To which the gatekeeper replied, "That recognition, my son, is worth one hundred ninety-eight points. Welcome to heaven!"

Let me begin by saying what we are all thinking – what the heck is up with this parable?! Am I right? As I was reading about this passage, I read one author who stated, this passage is "fraught with unattractive paradox". Really? To say the least! Thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth – for being conservative with his master's money?! Okay, so each talent was almost the equivalent to about one million dollars today, but still. What is this parable really about?

This parable is known as the parable of the talents. In the Gospel of Matthew, this parable stands in the middle of two other very difficult parables, last week was the Story of the Bridesmaids sleeping when the bridegroom comes later than expected and next week is the story of the Son of Man sitting on the throne and finding that some have not recognized him in the face of the hungry, thirsty, sick or prisoner. And in between, is this story of the property-owner who comes back and finds out what the slaves have done with his money. And just as the bridegroom in last week's story and the Son of man in next week's story are both likely to be thought of as Jesus, the slave-owner here in this parable also represents Jesus. But there are actually three different ways to interpret this parable, and in my opinion, really only one way is correct.

Many believe, the talents referred to in this parable really mean, talents, gifts, abilities. And if this is the case, then you are to use your God given gifts and talents to the best of your ability in serving God, and your accomplishments will please God. If you don't, then God will be mad at you. And while this may be true, this isn't what this parable is about. If Jesus is the property owner, than it doesn't make sense that he is the one dishing out talents – here you go - academic brilliance to you, athletic skills to you, oh and musical masterpiece to you. And what if you don't really know what your gifts are or how to use them? Besides, this parable was told by Jesus right before he dies, so he was preparing his disciples for his departure. The slaves or servants are the disciples. So while our gifts are important, and our talents should be used and

recognized as given by God; this is a story about what Jesus gives to his disciples before he leaves them and those are different kinds of God given gifts.

For others, the talents in this parable mean talents or money, the real money you have. So the message becomes, money won't help you if you keep it hidden under your mattress, you should go out and make more money, and the more you make, the more you have to give away. Like to the church for example. And while this may be true and is really VERY important, this too isn't what this parable is about. Sorry Stewardship Committee! So, if Jesus is preparing to leave, why would he leave different disciples different sums of money, lots of money, a few million dollars – Jesus had that kind of money? I don't think so. And simply say to them, "I hope this gets you through. Don't waste it or I'll get really mad". So while giving a portion of what we have been given to further the work of the church and to support organizations which help people, is important, this is a story about a different kind of gift given by God.

So, let's explore one other way to bring meaning to this strange parable. Because maybe this parable isn't about abilities, gifts or money, maybe it's really all about trust.

In the first scene, a man gets ready to leave on a journey and places things in the trust of his servants. So, if Jesus is the Master and the disciples his servants, Jesus is saying - when I leave you, I am entrusting to you, everything I have. Everything I am. Until I return again. And we know what gifts Jesus has given to them, its written - wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy and the most important thing of all, the Holy Spirit. The manifestation of the spirit was sent to help the disciples and us to teach and profess his truths, to observe and live according to his principles, to apply his promises to everyday living, to love and serve others.

In the second scene we see what happens while he is away. Some trusted and had faith enough to try to continue as Christ's disciples. Some went out and taught and preached and healed and served and loved. It isn't that some had more abilities, more talents, it wasn't a competition, no one is better than another. It is that all of our gifts are different, all of the opportunities to serve are different, and the first two took the time to learn their trade, their gift, in other words, to learn how to trade their master's stock.

In scene three we see what happens when the Master returns. To those who used his gifts, trusted in his message, kept the faith, the Master says, well done good and trustworthy servants of mine. But let me ask you this, what do you think he would have done if the first two servants didn't make any substantial profit? Would he have been mad or disappointed? I don't think so. I think he would have accepted them and loved them anyway for trying, for trusting, for having faith enough to try. Using their talents in faith.

And that's how it is for all of us. It isn't that all of us are supposed to be preachers or teachers or leaders or evangelists, or even session members, Deacons, fellowship organizers, property managers or even cookie bakers, crafters, wreath creators; it's doing what we can with what we have and trusting that God will use our little efforts to further God's work here on earth. That's the church. We are to trust in our own God given gifts to further God's church.

Yesterday, this church showed off all of your God given gifts and talents with the Church Bazaar. It was an amazing display of food, crafts, and so much more. And we know firsthand that any huge event isn't planned by one person. It's take's a community, a village, a church, to work together. Some of you weren't sure you could pull this off this year, but you did. Because you worked together and trusted that God would use your time and gifts to further the ministry of this church here.

Well, it's almost Thanksgiving and I have to admit it is one of my most favorite holidays. Why? Because it hasn't been commercialized, and so it isn't about toys or gifts or cards or decorations or stress; it's about - - - FOOD! And my favorite foods – mashed potatoes, gravy, turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes with those little marsh-mellows on top, and pie, lots of pie! And it's also about spending time with family and friends, watching parades and football games, and thinking about what we are most thankful for. What are you most thankful for this year, right now? What are some of the things you wrote down. I'll bet most of us are simply thankful to be healthy, to be in worship, to be with friends and family. But how do you thank God for all of the many blessings you have been given? By trusting God to use our meager gifts that we give to others.

Just look at this communion table. This is what we call Thanksgiving Sunday and I say thank you to all of you. You have given so much yesterday and today and this afternoon for the Lowther family. This is the day that we sing of our thanks to God with our hearts and our hands and our voices; this is the day we raise our song of harvest home, a joyous song of love and thank the lord of the harvest, who is always beside us to guide us. And so I say thank you, thank you for this harvest as it will bless the homes of so many this thanksgiving and beyond.

But that third slave, the third slave – with all the gifts, advantages, talents, knowledge, Jesus bestowed; he did nothing. What is it Francis Bacon used to say, "Money is like manure, good for nothing in the heap, but it must be spread." Spiritual gifts not used are wasted. Opportunities to love and serve others, opportunities to speak the message and heal others, opportunities to guide and nurture others. He hid them like they were his own, but they weren't, they were a gift. He was but a steward of those gifts. We are but a steward of these gifts. Even our gifts of money. And then he makes all kinds of excuses.

His excuse? He states he was afraid of the master. Well, if we are honest, we too might be a little afraid of our Master, our God is a God of justice and we really don't know what the "final accounting," the points we need, and what that means for each of us. But fear also means to be in awe and to be in awe means to love and respect and serve your master. All the slaves feared their landowner for sure, but they also loved him. And yearning for his approval they were willing to gamble his goods in pure blind faith to show how much they loved their master.

But this slave says he was afraid because the master was a harsh person, "you collect what you don't deposit and reap what you don't sow". In other words, he is saying "You don't follow the letter of the law and people still flock to you, love and serve you, it's not right, it's not the right way things are to be done". But since when was that the way of Jesus? The worst thing is not to fail, but to think God won't accept us when we fail, to think that God would reject us when we aren't perfect, to think God cares more about rules than love. This slave hadn't been listening at all. And Jesus is a little more than bewildered here, he's mad. He's really mad. He would have accepted anything – even the rock bottom interest in an account. Anything.

And now scene four makes sense, Jesus couldn't imagine that a disciple could spend three years with him and saw every day the way he shared food with the outcast, bringing all to the table, offering gifts of grace and forgiveness, healing the sick, loving and teaching the ways of living in God's spirit, and this disciple did nothing. This is the really strange part of this story – who after seeing Jesus lay down his life, hearing his words, receiving his invitation, being empowered by his gifts and sent forth; could ever block their ears, close their eyes, fold their arms and describe Jesus as a distant, cruel or merciless master!

As one pastor states, this parable “is telling us that Jesus is not a cunning manipulator, who gives us mysterious talents and then lies in wait to see whether we fail to use them properly. No, Jesus is a boundlessly generous friend who gives it all away and gives us far more than we need to imitate him in his absence. If we assume he is a generous friend, we will experience the miracle and the abundance of life. If we take him for a cunning manipulator, we shall experience life as miserable scarcity.” (1)

To be cast into outer darkness, is that place where one lives in constant fear, alone, with no light and no joy from God. That place of weeping and gnashing of teeth is where one stays in constant sorrow and anguish, constant anger and indignation, with no love and no forgiveness from God. We cannot allow ourselves to come to that place of being, not now, not with all that is happening in our world. There is light, there is love, there will be peace.

So Jesus is gone for now. But within the church are all the gifts he left for us to follow his teaching and imitate his ministry. So how do we get into Heaven, by using our God given talents? Yes, we get points for using those gifts given to us by God. By giving generously to the church in whatever way we can? Yes, we get points for supporting the ministry of this place; but in the end it’s all about trust. Trusting in God’s grace and mercy, trying our very best to keep the faith, follow in the ways of Christ, loving and serving one another, as best we can, with what we can, believing with all of our hearts that we’ll make it; by the grace of God someday we will all hear those wonderful words, “well done, good and faithful servant of mine”. Well done. Amen.

(1) Webster, The Rev. Charles . Sermon “A Boundlessly Generous Friend” .