

11/19/23

Matthew 25:14-30

“You’ve Got Talent”

In our house our high school senior, JohnPaul is in the thick of writing college essays and applications. I imagine this is true for those of you with high school seniors in your homes as well. In the college application process the applicant must showcase his or her talents so that they find a way to stand out in a crowded field.

The student first reflects on the talents he or she has, then decides which of those talents to write about in the essays, and finally determines how to make those talents sound interesting and compelling. How does one distinguish which talents to showcase?

Basket weaving or bread making?

Pottery or pickleball?

Geocaching or geometry?

Wrestling or writing?

For those of us not going through the college application process and who haven’t been giving as much thought to our talents, let’s take a minute to do so, right now. What talents come to your mind that you have in your wheelhouse? That, if you were writing a college essay you would choose to showcase? We all have something God given, in fact we all have an abundance of talents.

For example, I didn’t get a chance to attend the adult education offering this morning because I was teaching the Confirmation Class, but I have tasted and seen Jackie Cronin’s talents for cake

and cookie making & decorating. She has shared those talents at Christmas with her delicious Christmas cookies, during the cake walk when children were eyeing her beautiful creations, and at memorial service receptions when she made the cookies she served. That's one example of someone's talent. What God given talents do you have? (This is a similar exercise to what the children did).

Call them out if you are willing. What comes to your minds?

The Gospel passage Tom read to us today from Matthew 25 is commonly referred to as the Parable of the Talents. Talent though as we understand it today is not the way it's being used in the gospel passage. According to New Testament scholar Matt Skinner,

“That term talent was a monetary term when Jesus was alive. That's what the English word meant before it evolved to mean special abilities. The Greek word is *talanton*, and it referred to roughly 30 pounds of gold. This was equivalent to approximately 20 years of income for a typical laborer in Jesus' society. We're talking about extraordinary amounts of money in this story. The sheer plot of the parable, the mention of a man entrusting large gold blocks—whether five, two, or one of them—to the enslaved members of his household must have made Jesus' followers laugh out loud when they heard [this story]. No one does that. Not in their corner of the world. . . .

But that extravagance that destroys the plausibility of Jesus' story is a hint. It tells us what the parable is about. Jesus doesn't send his followers into the world with a morality tale to warn against the evils of laziness. This is a story about the responsibilities that come with incredible abundance, not about a cowardliness born out of scarcity. It's a story about our calling, [yours and mine]."¹

Let me ask you a follow-up question to the talents question posed previously. Think to yourself about what you have done with the abundant talents you have been given in life. How have they been used to glorify God? How have you put your talents to good work? Just as audits are necessary for business and evaluations essential for employment, so accountability and self-reflection is helpful for faithful living. How have you put to use your God given talents? This is for your own self-reflection. I won't have you call it out.

Last week Pastor Chris and I had our Personnel performance evaluations. Thank you to those of you who filled out the evaluation forms for us. We met with Personnel Committee members and we heard affirmations concerning what's going well in ministry here and also we heard questions about the strategic growth initiative and the Communications effort. It was a time to be patted on the back and told well done, as well as a time to say, well what about this, that, and the other.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Matt Skinner. "Easter Imperatives: Advocate" sermon preached 5/17/20 at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis, MN

When we think about the abundant talents that have been entrusted to you and me it's helpful to have that accountability, that circle of folks with whom we can be honest and can be honest with us, and say, ahh, maybe not so good here, and you nailed it in that area.

Your personnel committee is a good group who holds us accountable and asks the hard questions and shares the good and difficult news. For all of us life is a combination of that good news and difficult news and we need those folks in our lives who will hold us accountable whether it's parents, coaches, teachers, spouses, trusted family members, fellow church members, those who will tell us the truth about what they see and know. Also, our own evaluation is valuable when thinking about talents because the unexamined life may lead to an unhealthy life.

But what if this parable is stretching us to dig even deeper than just reflecting on our own talents or having others hold us accountable for our self-described talents? What if the talents the owner gave his slaves weren't commodities to be bought or sold . . . but gospel to be spread? What if the owner trusted his slaves with pieces of the greatest treasure ever given to human beings: the good news of Jesus Christ?

This is an exercise Preaching Professor Anna Carter Florence encourages listeners to think about in her commentary on this passage. Professor Florence writes:

“A man—let’s call him Jesus—was going on a journey. He called his slaves—let’s call them disciples—to him and entrusted the gospel to them. To one, he gave stories; to another, he gave compassion; to a third, he gave the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There were other disciples who got other things, but we’ll concentrate on these three. Then Jesus went away.

The disciple who got the stories went out and told them, and soon there were five other disciples telling those stories. The disciple who received compassion went out and offered that to someone else, and that person became a disciple, too, and she went on to give that compassion to others as well. But the disciple who had been given the bread of life and the cup of salvation dug a hole in the ground and buried them.

After a long time Jesus came back, and he asked his disciples to come and tell him what they had done with what he had given to them. The first two disciples told him about the stories and the compassion, and they introduced the new disciples, and those disciples introduced still other disciples that they had made.

Jesus was very pleased. ‘Well done, good and trustworthy disciples,’ he said to them. ‘You have been trustworthy in a few things, and now I will trust you with many things. Enter into my joy!’

Then it was the third disciple’s turn. The third disciple told Jesus, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh man. I knew you reaped where you didn’t sow and gathered where you didn’t scatter seed. I was afraid—of messing up, of not getting the theology right, of what you’d do to me if I

did—so I went and hid the bread of life and the cup of salvation in the ground. Here, you can have it back.’

But Jesus replied, ‘You wicked and lazy disciple! You knew, did you, that ‘I reap where I do not sow and gather where I do not scatter’? Well, if you were sure of that (where did you get that?!), you at least should have taken the bread of life and the cup of salvation to the church, and let them figure out what to do with it! Then when I came back, at least we would have some broken bread and those baskets full of leftovers!’

Jesus continued, ‘Take the bread and the cup away from this disciple and give it to the one of the others. For all those who have the good news, even more will be given to them. But from those who have nothing—because they have buried my gospel in the ground!—even what they have will be taken away.

‘As for this worthless disciple, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! Then, bring him back to church next Sunday and we’ll start again.’”²

Friends, we have this treasure that has been entrusted to us, abundant talents in this community, stories from those who have gone before and the ways in which they’ve shared Christ’s love. What does your essay and application highlight? How are you and I expressing, sharing, naming, embodying, living out the abundance with which we have been entrusted so

² Preaching Year A with Anna Carter Florence: Reflections on the Gospel Readings. “Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost,” St. Paul: Luther Seminary, 2016, p. 140

that those good gifts stand out and rise above and are recognized as such? I pray that you and I are not the ones burying the bread of life and the cup of salvation but rather are the ones, telling the story, sharing compassion, caring for ALL with Faith, Hope, & Love, walking with the outcast, and following Jesus. May we choose to walk as a child of the light.

And now to the one who can accomplish abundantly more than you or I can ask or imagine to God be all glory, power, honor, wisdom, and might forever and ever, Amen.

#377 I Want to Walk as a Child of Light