

Sermon for Sunday, November 19, 2023

In a few days, we will use our talents to offer gifts of love. If we buy a ridiculous amount of groceries and cook enough food to feed an army, we are using our talents. If we are going to someone else's house for the dinner and we bring our favorite pie, made with the recipe that our grandmother used, we are using our talents. If we are going out to a restaurant for the meal and we tip the staff generously, we are using our talents, in this case, the money we have. The talents we have and the way we use them are important, and that's the whole point of today's gospel parable.

It lands a little harshly on our ears, though. Three servants are told by their master that he is going out of town, and he will give them some money to be used wisely during his absence. He knows these servants well, and thus he gives them differing amounts of money that align with his assessment of their abilities. He is gone for a long time, longer than they had expected.

When he returns, he wants to see what they have done with what he gave each of them.

One doubles his master's money – five talents, or the equivalent of 100 years' labor! - by investing it. Another, who has received two talents, also doubles the master's money. The third, fearing he will do something wrong and lose the master's money, simply buries it in the ground so it wouldn't get lost.

If the boss gives an employee a large sum of money and then goes away for a long time, it might turn out well, or it might turn out not so well. You can imagine that. A less worthy servant might be tempted to betray his master's trust, perhaps investing it but skimming off some of the profit. He might be tempted to borrow it for his own needs in hopes that

he could recoup what he borrowed and more before the master returned. Or it might be like the last servant, who was so afraid to use what he was given that he didn't do anything to increase its value.

This master expects his servants to use their own abilities – a different kind of talent – to increase the value of what he has given them. It's odd to us to imagine a world where there is no benefit to the servant when they do well, but this was a different time and a different system. It's odd to us, too, that the master would think it appropriate to punish the third servant so harshly. But let's look at it a different way:

Change the word “talent” as a unit of money to “ability.” Imagine the boss saying “I know you're good at this particular kind of thing and I'm going to give you a job to use that ability to achieve more for us all.” It's a test to see how these servants live into their abilities. The first two use their abilities to do more, to multiply the value. The third does nothing. There is no multiplier effect.

Here's another way to understand this: someone I know – let's call her Lizzie – went through a really bad patch in her young adult years. She abused drugs, and barely made it through that period with her life, and got clean, but she had some tough medical problems in the wake of it all. She decided to go back to school and complete her degree to become a nurse. She worried how she'd do that, because her family was unable to help her and she had no money. She searched for options and found a scholarship program. Her tuition, room and board and some other expenses were covered by the scholarship, but there was no wiggle room – she had to complete the program in the time period for which she had the scholarship and she had to find a job immediately after graduation. In the course of her studies, she learned that she had a good mind and was gifted at working with patients. She was happy to do the tasks that others wouldn't do. She volunteered to do extra work on the ward to

which she was assigned. She had conversations with the head nurse in each department she rotated through, and asked probing questions about how she could be most prepared to find employment after she graduated. Six months before she graduated, she started her job search in earnest. And then the pandemic hit. Even student nurses were pressed into service as more and more of the regular staff fell ill. And Lizzie worked as hard as she could, and her dedication and patience and ever-more-finely-honed skills were being noticed. She was still in classes, although they met remotely, but she was also volunteering to cover shifts in her off-time, although she was exhausted as everyone was in those days. Her graduation was not the glorious formal acclamation she had hoped for, despite the fact that she was at the top of her class. It was a virtual thing, as so many graduations were. But because she had worked so hard and volunteered in so many areas of the hospital, there was no question that she would be brought on staff as soon as she passed her boards. She had taken her natural God-given talents, honed them with learning skills she saw in her supervisors, reached out to become known, and was employed even before she had passed her boards so that she would be compensated at some level.

In other words, she had multiplied the talents she was given, despite the struggles, despite the fears that she was not enough, despite the trauma that was part of her past life. She found a path forward, not an easy one, but the right one for her.

It could have been different. She could have decided after coming out of rehab that she was nothing special, and she didn't really have anything to offer. She might have said to herself "you're nothing but an ex-addict and you can't possibly be able to do much other than being a cashier at the Dollar General." She might have fallen back into drug use.

She could have minimized her own gifts and crawled into a hole in the ground, because she was so afraid of failing. Burying her talent. But she found a path to multiplying what she already had.

It's important to hear that, because when we hear the master treating his servant so harshly for burying that coin in the ground out of fear, we think "What a mean master!"

But if our Heavenly Master gives us talent, gives us ability, gives us gifts, he wants us to multiply what he has given us not for His own wealth but because the multiplication of our gifts means we can do more to make our world better.

We are a people of gifts, of skills, of experience, of talents. With the possible exception of the experience piece, these are gifts from God. On any given day, it's easy to say "I'm just too tired." Or "Why me? Can't someone else do it?" Or "I'm not really so hot at this, so I'd better let someone else do it."

But here's the thing I know about this beautiful faith family: we are willing to take what God has given us and multiply it for the greater good of those in this place, of those beyond these walls in this community, and for those far afield who need our help. That is why we come home to this place today, to be reminded of what we have learned here. Our gifts are not just for our own personal use. God has given them to us for a larger purpose. May we give thanks to God in this week when gratitude is front and center in our hearts, and may we go out to use those gifts, to multiply those gifts, to feel God's joy in our love and service and generosity. May we enter into the joy of God, our Master. And may we never stop doing that, because we may have talents we didn't even realize yet...and they're waiting to be multiplied.

God bless you and may Thanksgiving be a time when you discover a talent you didn't recognize in yourself and use it for God's work in this time and place!

Amen.