

Sermon for Zion, February 16, 2020 – Annual Meeting Sunday

Hymns: 655 – Give me oil in my lamp; 637 – Take my life and let it be;

Jesus, All for Jesus; 648 – I’m gonna live so God can use me

Scripture: Luke 19:11-24; Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon Title: Talents Galore

Matthew 25:14-30 - Holman Christian Standard Bible

“For it is just like a man going on a journey. He called his own servants and turned over his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; and to another, one—to each according to his own ability. Then he went on a journey.

Immediately the man who had received five talents went, put them to work, and earned five more. In the same way the man with two earned two more. But the man who had received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master’s money.

“After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five talents approached, presented five more talents, and said, ‘Master, you gave me five talents. Look, I’ve earned five more talents.’

“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master’s joy!’

“Then the man with two talents also approached. He said, ‘Master, you gave me two talents. Look, I’ve earned two more talents.’

“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You were faithful over a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Share your master’s joy!’

“Then the man who had received one talent also approached and said, ‘Master, I know you. You’re a difficult man, reaping where you haven’t sown and gathering where you haven’t scattered seed. So I was afraid and went off and hid your talent in the ground. Look, you have what is yours.’

“But his master replied to him, ‘You evil, lazy servant! If you knew that I reap where I haven’t sown and gather where I haven’t scattered, then you should have deposited my money with the bankers. And when I returned I at least would have received my money back with interest.

“So take the talent from him and give it to the one who has 10 talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have more than enough. But from the one who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. And throw this good-for-nothing slave into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

This story makes me nervous. In fact, a lot of the stories Jesus tells make me nervous, because somehow, I can't help but identify with the guy in the story that comes off looking like – well, looking less than good.

Like when we hear Jesus on prayer. “Don't be like those fellows who pray with fancy words and elaborate prayers,” says Jesus, “the guys who don't know God.” Suddenly, I'm taking a long and complicated look at my long and complicated prayers. Or like the story of the Good Samaritan, where the first two who pass by the poor chap in the ditch are religious professionals, too busy being religiously professional to be of any real value to people in need. Or like; well, like the guy in our story today, a story found in both Luke and Matthew – although we are working our way through the Gospel of Luke, I'm telling the more straightforward Matthew version, but the cast of characters are the same. And once again, I find myself identifying with one of the characters in particular. And you can probably guess which guy I mean.

Already, we get an idea that this chap wasn't lead man in the bobsled; as the story has it, the master is doling out talents to his servants, to make use of while he's away. A talent was a measurement of weight used for precious metals like silver, and was equivalent to about 75 pounds – so a single talent had a value in today's money of about a fifty thousand dollars or so. Big money, in other words. So as we were saying, the one fellow is given ten talents to work with – half a million bucks - the other gets five – a quarter million - and I'm only given two, but a hundred thousand dollars is enough responsibility to give me a bad case of nerves.

The first servant goes out, takes chances, invests, works hard, makes the money (as we hear in the commercials) work for him, and soon he's got a cool million, having doubled his master's money. The second servant does the same, making full use of that entrusted to him, and he doubles as well. Me? Well, I'm the guy whose idea of long-term investment involves a shovel and a hole. Because what if I fail? What if I lose it? What if I am embarrassed? What if I find other things which take my time away from this responsibility? What if I couldn't be bothered? Or, more likely, why don't I let those other guys carry the load; after all, look at all the talents they have, and all they are doing; my contribution isn't going to mean much. I'll let them do it all, and as for mine, I'll bury it safe and sound where nothing can happen to it, good or bad.

We know the end of the story. The Master comes back from his dealings abroad, rewards the ones who put their talents to use, and as for me, secretly hoping to be commended for playing it safe; well, as for me, I am sent to that place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Serves me right. “Hey, God! Look at what I am doing with all these talents you entrusted to me! Nothing! Aren’t you pleased?” Or to tell it another way:

My favorite toy when I was a kid was Lego. Still is! Legos were a little different back then; no little Lego people, for instance, and generally just white and red bricks, with some variation. But I played with Lego probably every day, and would build what my memory recalls as astonishing structures of great beauty and cunning design. And then the next day, I would take them apart and start all over again.

So it was a delight to me when my nephew, who is now a father of two in his thirties, was himself six years old, just the right age to start using Lego. I shopped carefully for the kit which would provide the most versatility and possibility for expansion. We had a great time putting the project together, the one pictured on the box, following instructions carefully. I even let him do a few things. After all, it was his Christmas present. So we built, and we played. He went to bed doubtless dreaming Lego dreams. I know I did.

The next time when I saw him, the model we’d built was still all together. I suggested we take it all apart and build something new. He looked at me with incredulous six-year-old eyes. “Take it apart? No way!” An argument ensued, the upshot of which is that if you went to his house ten years later, you would see upon his shelf, that very Lego kit, still together, on display. In fact, you would see a great deal more Lego, all of increasing complexity, all carefully assembled, all carefully displayed. This hurt me whenever I saw it. I eventually stopped buying him Lego, because it was too painful for me to see such a gift used once, and once only. All the possible creativity, variation, invention and discovery was lost. Having learned my lesson, we started our own children Hannah and Jacob on Duplo, and part of the fun was wrecking whatever we had built, and starting all over again. Jacob especially liked the wrecking part (My nephew, by the way, is now a full partner in a forensic engineering firm, so he’s bounced back from such an unpromising childhood).

What has this got to do with the story of the talents? Plenty. Let me retell our Scripture passage using my experience with my nephew in mind:

An uncle was giving gifts to his nephews. To the first nephew, he gave a big box of Lego, to the second a medium box, to the third a small box. The next time the uncle visited, he asked about the Lego. The first nephew said, “It is wonderful. I have built the model which came with the instructions, and I have also reused the blocks and built five

more on my own.” The uncle was delighted, and gave the nephew even more Lego to use. The second nephew said, “It is wonderful. I have built the model which came with the instructions, and I have also reused the blocks and built two more on my own.” The uncle was again delighted, and again gave that nephew even more Lego to use. The third nephew, however, said, “I was afraid that if I wrecked anything you would be mad, so I didn’t even open the box, I just hid it under my bed. Here it is, just like you gave it to me. Unopened and unused.” The uncle was very unhappy, and said, “There’s no point in giving you any more Lego if you’re not even going to bother to use it. Here, let the others have yours, so it will be used. As for you, let’s take you to the dentist, where there will be weeping and cleaning of teeth.

All right, the story gets weak at the end, but the point is made. I’m sure everyone knows the feeling of having given someone a present, only to see it relegated to a dust-gathering shelf, doomed to reside in the graveyard of unwanted, unused gifts.

Mind you, this is what we do with God all the time. God blesses us with, entrusts us with, stuffs us full, of gifts. And we bury them in the ground, fold them into a bottom drawer, stick them up on the dusty shelf. We do it all the time. And we don’t even think about it.

What I am saying is, and what our reading from this morning stresses is, “Do something with what you have been given.” That’s the way to please God, by making use of the gifts God has given us. It is why we were entrusted with our many gifts and talents in the first place. It is what God has in mind for us. It is all God has in mind for us. For we have been called to employ our gifts on behalf of our church and our world. We have been called.

You see, to be a Christian means to be called. To be a Christian means to have a purpose. To be a Christian means to put in the extra effort to try to make a difference in the lives of those around us, to break out, to break free of our little shells, to think, to feel, to respond. It is to use our gifts, our talents, to use “who we are” to bring Christ to our world. This is what this “new life” is all about. This is what this “eyes to see and ears to hear” is all about. We have been called! Every one of us has been called.

As Presbyterians, we have a special theology of being called, or in the Latin term, of having a Vocation. Our statement of faith, Living Faith, puts it in this way:

We are called to work out the meaning of our own lives and to find our true vocation in the love and service of God. We serve and love God by the service and love

of creation, especially the care of the needy. Every kind of work that is honest and serves others is a vocation from the Lord. Calling means the necessity to deny selfish ambition and desire in order to minister to others. In God's service, true freedom is to be found.

The challenge to live out that calling to the best of our ability, to use our gifts to the greatest and most meaningful extent, is the challenge which God has given to each one of us. And for us, the challenge begins right here, at Zion Presbyterian Church. We are challenged, we are called, to participate in and support this family of faith, and to reach out to our world, according to our gifts, and to the best of our abilities. And because we are all different, with different gifts, different talents, different abilities, the way in which we respond to that challenge and live that calling will be different for each one of us.

Some will act through the work of committees, and will give of their time and their energy. Some will visit both the healthy and the sick, and bring comfort and encouragement. Some will share the faith with others through teaching and witness. Some will sing, some will bring music which lifts our hearts to God. Some will pray for the church, for its members, for its community, for the world. Some will cook, some will clean, some will get done what needs doing. All of us will be as conscientious and faithful in attendance as our situations allow us, and will support one another through our worship of God. All of us will seek, to the degree to which we have been given, to support the work of the church financially, so that not only its immediate financial needs might be met, but so that we might prepare and plan for the future of our church; or, of equal or greater importance, so that outreach can happen, locally and around the world.

Who knows what an inventory of gifts we as a congregation represent? Which gifts do you have? Organization? Vision? Compassion? Teaching? Music? Prayer? Humour? Conversation? Love? Patience? Time? Wealth? Encouragement? The ability to make a pot of coffee? The cheerful willingness to do whatever task needs doing? Who knows what we could do in our church, our community, our world, if we pooled our gifts and talents in the service of the work of God?

Whatever gifts we possess, whatever we do, all of us are called to do something, to do anything, to give ourselves for the work of God. It is our purpose; it is our vocation: it is our destiny. It is how we give back, how we make use of that given to us, beyond just warming a pew on Sunday morning. Christianity is about more, infinitely more, than Sunday morning. The worship in which we engage on Sunday mornings was never intended to be the end goal or sum total of our Christian experience; it is the time

in which we gather to celebrate God's love, to be encouraged by God's grace, to be challenged by God's word, and to be equipped to serve in response to that very love, grace, and word. Worship is the practice, the intermission, the pep talk, the breather; it isn't the game.

As we all seek to live according to how God has called us, as we all seek to serve and love creation, care for the needy, deny our selfish desires and do the right thing rather than the comfortable or easy thing, then will the world again feel the presence of Christ in its midst. Then will the love of God be seen and felt by those who are crying out for even the tiniest crumb of love. Then will the world see the love and justice of God made real. Then will this church be realizing its purpose, its goal, its intention first dreamt of more than a century and a half ago. Then will we finally feel the true freedom, the true release, the true joy of living as we were meant to live, of living as we were created to live, of living to the full the gift of life entrusted to us.

As our Annual Meeting approaches, as we consider the many challenges and opportunities our congregation will encounter the upcoming year, I hope that you will take time to think about that which you have been given, that with which you have been entrusted. I hope you would consider how you might respond to the love, grace and Word of God by sharing your gifts through your involvement with the church, and through the church, with the whole world; that if circumstances have meant that your role within this community of faith has been passive, you might consider how it would become, by the grace of God, active; that you might consider what it means for each of us to be gifted, for each of us to be called. It is in service that true freedom and purpose is to be found.

I look around this good congregation, and I see talents galore. Take your talents off the shelf. Blow the dust off of them. Try them on. Try them out. Share them with others. Bring them to church, and try them out here. Then bring them out from here, and through using them, through sharing them with others, be the church that God would have you be, the very body of Christ, reaching out in love and compassion in our homes, our community, our country, our world.

May God, who has given to us the gifts of life, by his grace, show us why, and where, and how we might serve, and in serving, live with joy in our hearts. Amen.