

## On Using the Talents We have been Given

Prayer: *God of our history, we know that we stand on the shoulders of so many giants in the faith—Moses and Miriam, Joshua and Deborah, Mary and Paul, and countless others throughout time. We are here because of their faithfulness to you, and your faithfulness to them, which is beyond measure and beyond our imagining. Always present God, we know that others will stand on our shoulders. In your faithfulness speak to us, that we might be equipped for ministry and mission in all the world, in Jesus' name. Amen.*

A nice thing about being a parent is that you get to read children's books. Now that I am a grandparent, it is even more fun to read those great children's stories to the grand children. One of my favorite books has been *The Little Engine That Could*.

It tells the story of a tiny steam engine (of course, the engine talks just like a real person) who one day faced an insurmountable problem. How was he to get the train loaded of toys ... over the mountain to the anxiously awaiting children?

The little engine had to decide to try ... or not to try ... to climb the gigantic mountain. Would he have enough muscle and power in his engine? There's only one way to find out. The engine begins to move up the mountain. He chugs along, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can, ... I think I can."

Then having reached the very top, he begins to descend the other side of the mountain gaining speed, faster and faster, ... "I thought I could, I thought I could, ... I thought I could."

We all know, as mature adults who have faced countless challenges in life, there are things in life for which our "wanting" alone will not be enough. And yet ... life is filled with opportunities that we miss for no other reason than we are just too reluctant to try. We become dejected, depressed, afraid ... and say, "There is nothing I can do."

Is there anyone hearing my voice that can say they have never felt that way?

Go with me now to our reading from Matthew's Gospel. Our assigned scripture takes us to the familiar "Parable of the Talents." A "talent" in those days was a very large denomination of money. Scholars have estimated that a talent was worth about six thousand days wages of a laborer, ... or at least the income a working person would make in twenty years! Other estimates have suggested that one talent would be equivalent to ten million dollars.

In any case, it was a great deal of money, and even the slave who was only given one talent was given a huge gift and the gifts were given with absolutely no instructions. Two of the men risk losing the gifts and proceeded to make wise investments with a good return. The third uses cautiousness and buried the gift for safe-keeping.

There came the time for reviewing the books. The two servants holding most of the capital are commended for their wise investments. The master graciously receives the efforts of the first two servants, "*Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.*" (Mat.

25:21)

In words with a distinctly modern ring, the one-talent servant blames the master for his failure to have made even a modest return. The man with the one-talent saw the master's trust as a thinly disguised trap to make him fail and be punished. To this, the master responded: "*You wicked and lazy slave!*" and the gift was taken away and given to the others.

Obviously, God is meant to be the master in the story. For most of us our image of God is that of one who is "gentle, slow to anger and merciful." But this text comes at us right in our faces with an image of God that is wrathful, filled with anger, and always with extremely high expectations.

All our attention is drawn to the third servant who cautiously protected the single talent gift. It is just unfair! As one commentator has written about the third servant: "When challenged as to why he has not increased the money entrusted to him, ... he responds with a characterization of the master as a harsh and unjust man who inspires only fear and caution." (*New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 453)

We see the angry master who takes it out on the one who wasted a given opportunity. Does our fear prevent us from using the gifts of God that we know we have received?

Yet, is there not a positive side to this story? Just maybe the point of the story is not "this is what God is like" ... or "this is how God will treat us." But rather, the point lies in the common-sense observation that Jesus is telling us that everything we do in life is a part of our faithful actions to follow the will of God. The writer, Matthew, uses this image of "faithful vs. unfaithful servants" throughout his gospel and this is just one more story in his narrative of the teachings of Jesus. When accumulated over the previous four chapters, the message seems to come down to the relationship between being a faithful follower and being willing to take risks. The issue for the third servant was not that he lost his single talent, but much more that he was so overly cautious and filled with fear.

It is all about *Using the Talents Given!*

There is the message for you and me: Use them ... or lose them! Are we that person who was afraid to fail and even afraid to try? There are times when we do not want to risk losing our gifts. The fall of the stock market this past week has gotten our attention related to the consequences of making investments in high-risk corporate America. There are times when we hang back, we rationalize, we make excuses, and we play it safe. And if we play it safe ... we lose! We lose an opportunity to be faithful and find the master's joy. And we may forfeit the very gifts we have been given. Even as we may now reside in these latter stages of life ... you and I are not done ... there is more we can do to use the talents we have been given. God has made investments in you, ... in you, ... in all of us.

Now, let me go in a different direction. Several weeks ago, 24 people from Faith Church got on a bus and headed north and then east to the Navajo Reservation. We were venturing into a very different culture with people we did not know ... and there was a bit of a risk that the whole experience would fall a part. It proved to be a way for us to explore more deeply our faith and to use the gifts we have been given. It was all about building relationships with new friends, understanding the complicated issues in life that they face, and to acknowledge that we are sisters and brothers in Christ. The trip was a wonderful experience for our church, but also for the churches in Chinle and Ganado. We pray that these relationships will be strengthened when

a group from these churches will visit Faith Church after the first of the year. We travelers ... and this congregation are risk-takers.

Please, let us also acknowledge that we all have gifts ... our talents ... given to us by God. Some of us may be one talent, two talent, or five talent people ,, and remember this is about money. Where ever we find ourselves in our life journey, the biblical word for us is to risk using these gifts of God in our lives. There is an expectation that we will faithfully use our gifts. We might even call it “spiritual speculation” on God’s investment.

The obvious question for us becomes ... “What will we do with God’s investment in us?” What are we doing today with our God-given gifts? How will you use those gifts of time, talent, and money ... tomorrow, next week, and next year? Will you see your contributions to the work of Christ through Faith Presbyterian Church as a privilege? Our giving to the shared ministries of this church is an opportunity for “spiritual speculation” on God’s investment in you.

Ann Weems, has written a poem relating this scripture and its meaning for us.

*Talent is a strange word;  
it means a coin  
or one’s capability  
or a gift.*

*So when we are given children and  
we neglect to tell them the  
stories of faith;  
we are burying our talents.*

*When we are given friends  
and we neglect to significantly  
touch their lives;  
we are burying our talents.*

*And when we are given a song to sing  
and we sing it not,  
we are burying our talents.*

*Whatever talent means ...  
Whatever it is we’re burying ...  
our money or a song,*

*The meaning of the story is clear:  
Burying talents means  
not using God’s gifts.  
My prayer is that we’ll be called  
**GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANTS!***

When we think about ourselves as having within us, God’s personal gifts and investments ... we can do something ... and we want to do something. As an anonymous writer has written:

*I am only one, but I am one;  
I can't do everything,  
but I can do something.  
And what I can do,  
that I ought to do.  
By the grace of God, I will do!*

On this Pledge Dedication Sunday, the parable of the talents offers us this reality check: Are we going to live principally in fear or in gratitude? Our goal is for a pledge from each member and friend, given not out of compulsion, nor sense of responsibility, and certainly not out of a sense of fear.

Our gifts to and through Faith Presbyterian Church are given out of thanksgiving because we are discovering what it means to live in the joy of our master.

It is a time to use our gifts ... or lose them! It is all about ***Using the Talents Given!*** It is all about risking in faith.

Scriptures: Psalm 123; Matthew 25:14-30