

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

October 14, 2018, The 20th Sunday After Pentecost/The 27th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Psalm 90:1-2, 14-17, Matthew 25: 14-30

SERMON SERIES: STEWARDS FOR CHRIST

WE ARE ALL TALENTED STEWARDS--USING THE GIFTS WE'VE BEEN GIVEN

We are all talented stewards! We are all talented gift-givers to our God!

This morning we come to the second sermon in our four week sermon series on stewardship. If you weren't with us last week, or you don't remember last week's assurances,

let me say again that you are not facing four weeks of talk about money.

This is not some hidden agenda to talk about the budget!

Instead I am inviting us to pay attention to who we are as stewards, care-givers of God's gifts who we are as gift-givers to God.

The main point of this sermon series is to pay attention to all the things that God has put in our lives in love. And then to look at the ways we can respond to God's good gifts, by loving God back. God has made us care givers, or stewards, of so many things

Last week, on World Communion Sunday we looked at the gift of being world citizens. Today we are gathered to talk about how talented we each are!

Today we are going to look at one of Jesus' parables and see what Jesus was saying to his disciples then and to us today about how to live as God's good talented people.

As we look at the parable of the talents, there are four points that will help us better understand what Jesus was saying.

FIRST, Jesus made up this story to tell his disciples what God's coming kingdom was going to be like. This section of Matthew begins with the words: (25:1) "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this." The point of this story that Jesus told was to focus both

on how we live as God's good stewards

and to focus on how our God will hold each of us

accountable for how we have lived the life of stewardship.

THE SECOND thing to understand is what a talent was in Jesus' day. A talent was an amount of money. One talent equaled 15 years wages by a laborer. What Jesus wants us to hear right away is that he is talking about each servant being given a huge responsibility. The good gifts God gives to us bring responsibility because God has given us so much.

To translate this into dollars, let's say you make \$50,000 a year. If this story were told today, Jesus would say, a man was going on a long journey, and he called three of his employees to meet with him in his office. He was entrusting his property to these three workers.

He gave one of them \$750,000, one of them \$1.5 million and one of them \$3,750,000.

Then this man went away and before he left he didn't tell them what to do with the money. Two of the workers went out immediately and they invested the money they'd been given. But one of the men went home, put the money in a coffee can and hid it in his basement work room, thinking the money would be perfectly safe there until his boss returned.

A THIRD point in the parable is how the master decided to give one person 1 talents, one 2 talents, and one 5 talents. As Jesus told this story he said that the master gave the slaves different amounts, according to their ability. What we are each given to serve God with is God's decision. We aren't called to ponder if we are one, two or five-talent people. This is a story about being ourselves and using what we've each been uniquely given.

THE FOURTH AND FINAL POINT ties into the first point. This was a parable about how people are to live as God's people. As we focus on the end of the story, remember it is about God holding us accountable for the choices we make in our lives. The focus is on what we are doing. This is not a parable about getting into heaven or not. It is a parable about when we are in heaven, God will look for the ways we have used the abundant gifts that God has given to each of us.

So, the parable concludes with the scene of the master's return. As Jesus told this story about what would happen in God's kingdom he said that the servant who was given five talents made five more and the servant with two talents made two more, or in dollars; the servant with \$3,750,000 made \$7.5 million, the servant with \$1.5 million made \$3 million. And the master's response to both of them was: "Well done, good and trustworthy employee. You have been trustworthy in a few things and now I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

Which brings us to the one talent servant and his coffee can of money. In Jesus' day it was actually common practice to bury money that had been entrusted to you. The Jewish laws said that you no longer had responsibility over the money if something happened to it while it was in the ground.

So when the disciples heard the beginning of this story, they would probably have wondered if the servants who invested the money were being very wise and thinking that the servant with one talent had made a good and safe decision.

But Jesus makes it very clear that the man returning with the same \$750,000 had not been trustworthy as far as the master was concerned. He said to the one-talent servant, you are worthless, you are worth nothing to me.

Because the man with \$750,000 based his decision to bury the money on his perceptions of the master. He basically blamed the master saying: "I knew you were really hard to deal with, and you were very demanding, and you expect way too much from people. So I hid what you gave me away and now I am giving back to you exactly what is yours. Take it, you should be glad to be getting it back from me."

The master's response in the parable was: "If you thought those harsh things about me you should have at least invested the money in an interest bearing savings account until I got back, so I'd least I'd also receive the interest money along with my \$750,000."

And the master took the \$750,000 away from him and gave it to the man who was watching over the \$7.5 million dollars. And then the master banishes the man from his sight and send him away from the joyous welcome the other two servants received.

So putting these four points together again as we reflect on our own lives, FIRST: Jesus is talking about God's coming kingdom and this is an incredibly joyous thing. Jesus did not tell this story to make us feel guilty. I think he definitely told this story to nudge us, with a not so subtle nudge! This isn't a guilt-trip story, it's a parable about God's loving expectations of us.

So as we think about this story, we are being invited to the heavenly banquet. This is a story about that incredible day when we will be home in heaven with our God. Jesus isn't saying, you'd better dread that day. He was saying instead, there are ways that you can prepare your lives to one day meet God face to face.

SECONDLY Jesus is reminding us that we have been entrusted with huge gifts and with those gifts comes responsibilities.

And what are those gifts? What are the talents we've each been given? The answer is as different as each one of us gathered in this sanctuary this morning. We are God's unique creations and we have been given gifts that are so much bigger than money.

Some of our talents are spiritual, the gifts of prayer, hospitality and welcome to others, or praise and worship.

Others have to do with what we create, and how we love and serve other people.

Some talents are athletic, some have to do with how we make people feel, and some have to do with silence and meditation,

Others with how we care for people in need.

Some talents have to do with the work you do, the art, music and dance you create, the laughter you share, your favorite subject in school, your friendships, the mission work you like to do, and yes even your financial abilities are talents.

I believe we know when we are using the talents God has given us because it is those times that we feel most completely ourselves.

This parable challenges us to take seriously the gifts that God has given us. And I'm convinced there is a lot of joy in the midst of that seriousness. Part of our call as people of faith is discover and use what we've been given.

This isn't a curse of drudgery, but an invitation to be the very best stewards that God has created us to be..

Because THE THIRD point is that God has given each of us different talents based on our abilities. Just like the master in the story deciding what each servant could handle. This is a

parable about using what we've been given. Because there isn't one of us here who doesn't have talents given by God.

Today we are being nudged by God to make use of who we are and what our gifts and talents are. Because the FOURTH point is that we are expected to use what we've been given very well.

This is a call to action for all the days of our lives. I read a wonderful story in the October (2018) *Presbyterians Today* that reminds us that we have gifts to use throughout all the days of our lives.

It's your birthday. The phone rings. While it could be a family member or a friend wishing you well on your special day, the last thing you might expect to hear is a 99-year-old man on the other end of the call singing "Happy Birthday" to you.

But that's exactly what happens to those who attend Westminster Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, where Carl Webb has found his purpose, his "call" so to speak, in serving God. And that "call" is to be the birthday crooner of the church.

In all of the 18 years of this unique ministry, Webb has had only five days off. And that's only because on those days he didn't have anyone to sing "Happy Birthday" to, he says. Webb has also kept track of the number of calls he has made over the years.

"I've done between 35,000 and 36,000 'Happy Birthday' calls to people at my church — even strangers," Webb said.

More than 2,000 people attend Westminster Presbyterian. Webb estimates that he averages six calls a day.

Webb moved to Greensboro after his wife of 54 years, Connie, passed away in 1996. They were from Eden, North Carolina, where he once worked for a radio station.

"I was the voice of 'the wonderful land of Eden, WLOE,'" Webb said, repeating the station's tagline from back in the day.

Webb was also a renowned soloist, using his God-given gift of song for all of Eden.

"He was the famous wedding and funeral person," said his daughter Betsy, director of music ministries at Westminster Presbyterian.

Webb now lives with Betsy in her family's basement. When he started going to church with her, he noticed church secretaries taking a sheet of paper from a packet on one of the church's walls.

"What is that, Betsy?" he inquired. His daughter replied that it was a list of birthdays for the month — for all of the people who went to church.

“I thought, ‘Doggone it, you love to sing,’” Webb said. “You can sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to people.”

He asked for a copy of the birthday list, and the “Birthday Man” was born....

The birthday singing is a blessing, ~~though~~, for Webb as well as those in the congregation.

“He couldn’t walk and see as well as he once did,” said Betsy . “He was trying to find something he could do for the church.”

Once people in the church knew who was singing — and why — word spread beyond the church family. Even people Betsy didn’t know tried to get on her father’s “Happy Birthday” singing list. Betsy’s children also called, asking if “Papa” could add another friend’s name to his list.

On Webb’s 99th birthday this past May, Westminster Presbyterian Church did something special for the famous birthday man: The entire congregation sang “Happy Birthday” to him. The song was followed with a standing ovation and thunderous clapping.

“It was a great joy to know people remembered me on my birthday, in the same way that I remember them,” Webb said, adding he plans to sing until he can’t breathe anymore.

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/pt-1018-99sing/>

We are called to trust with joy the talents we’ve been given, and then we are to use them. One of the key things to be learned from the one-talent servant is the old phrase: “Use it or lose it!” Don’t let your talents atrophy. Exercise those talents as often as you can.

Because as the sermon title says, “We are all talented stewards.” None of us are better than others, all of us have different talents created especially for us by our loving God. Being gift-givers to God means being yourself.

We are being faithful stewards when we live our lives exactly the way God created us to live, loving God and loving the people in our lives exactly the way God created us to love and serve.

As we wait to one day enter God’s kingdom with joy, let us live in the here and now, joyfully using all the talents we’ve been given. Amen.

cf: 03-09-21