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“Gifted”

Judges 4:1-7 Matthew 25:14-30 | Thessalonians 5:1-11

INTRODUCTION TO JUDGES 4:1-7

Now that Joshua is gone Israel begins a repetitive cycle. Over and over again Israel sins, God raises up an oppressor, Israel cries for mercy and God raises up a deliverer. This time the leader is a woman named Deborah. Hear the word of the Lord from Judges 4:1-7.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 25:14-30

In this morning's parable Jesus builds on the parable of the Bridesmaids we looked at last week. In the same way that he warned folks of not being ready when the master returned, this morning's parable warns us to be busy doing what we've been called to do and using what we've been given so that when the Lord returns we will have something to show for what has been entrusted to us. Hear the gospel of our Lord from Matthew 25:14-30

Let's pray.

Lord, thank you for this parable. Thank you for the gifts and talents you have entrusted to us. Help us as we examine this part of your teaching to look inside our own hearts and see how we can be more faithful and more effective in using the gifts and talents you have given to us. Speak to us Lord. Open our ears and hearts to receive your word for us. Amen.

This week it was announced that Jose Altuve won the Most Valuable Player for the American League. He was gifted AND talented—multi-talented. I watched a video clip of an interview this morning and he kept bowing his head and kissing his child in his wife's arms. He was known for his all-around valuable play, especially for hitting. He had 200 hits for the last three years running and this year won the American League batting title, which he has won 3 out of the last four years. He hit 3 home runs in a playoff game against the Yankees! Did you know though he was third in the league with 34 stolen bases? He was good at stealing, but not as good as Ty Cobb.

In 1915, Ty Cobb set the record for stolen bases in a year with 96. Seven years later, Max Carey of the Pittsburgh Pirates became second best with 51 stolen bases. Does this mean that Cobb was twice as good as Carey, his closest rival?

Maybe not. Here's the facts: Cobb made 134 attempts, Carey, 53. Cobb failed 38 times; Carey only failed twice. Cobb succeeded 96 times, Carey succeeded 51 times. Cobb's average was only 71 percent. Carey's average was 96 percent. Carey's average was much better than Cobb's, but Cobb tried 81 more times than Carey.

Here is the key: His 81 additional tries produced 44 more stolen bases. Cobb risked failure 81 more times in one season than his closest rival and Cobb goes down in history as the greatest base runner of all time. Why? Both Ty and Max were gifted, but Ty tried more times. Max wasn't even close to trying Ty.

In Jesus' parable, the master entrusts an enormous amount of money to his three servants. The amount of money was called a "talent." To give you some idea of the worth of one talent, it would be the total amount earned by a laborer working six days a week every week for twenty years. Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. One talent was the equivalent of 6,000 pieces of silver!

According to the U.S. Census, one year the median income in America was \$40,668. That would mean that if 1 talent was worth 20 years wages that would equal about \$813,360. That means the other two would have received \$1.6 million and \$4 million to invest for their master.

We're not talking about paltry sums here. This means that the master in Jesus' parable had a significant amount of trust in the abilities of these three men. You just don't hand over a million dollars to a stranger who hasn't been tried and trusted.

The first two go out and trade with the funds, do business with them, speculate a little and double their master's money. The 1 talent man was afraid and decided to go by the book. After all, the book, the rabbinic law said that whoever immediately buries property entrusted to him is no longer liable because he has taken the safest course conceivable. Besides, if he hid it in the ground it was not registered with anyone else and who knows, maybe the master doesn't come back and he could have the money for himself!

In the story the master does return and the 1 talent man produces the evidence that he has preserved what had been given into his charge. He didn't lose it, but he didn't use it. No one benefited from it, neither the servant nor the master nor the business community nor even the economy. Instead of being praised as a prudent man, the servant is called "wicked and slothful." He loses his one talent and along with it the opportunity he could have had by using it and probably being of being entrusted with the responsibility in the future.

It is vitally important that we read Jesus' parable this way and not as a reward-for-success vs. punishment-for-failure story. The 5 talent and 3 talent men are not rewarded for succeeding. They are commended - called good and faithful servants - for taking a risk, for realizing that they had been entrusted with opportunity and possibility and responsibility and that they had been given the power, the ability and the freedom to use those things, to invest them and potentially capitalize on them, for their own and others' benefit.

The one talent man is called a wicked and slothful servant - not for his lack of success, but for his lack of TRYING, his paralyzing fear and his resultant refusal

to risk action, to make use of what had been entrusted to him. He is condemned for his refusal, in a word, to live.

It is a sad story, a tragic one. Unfortunately, what makes it even more so is its accurate depiction of the outlook and attitude of entirely too many folk, even some church folk. Unfortunately the church has some people who are not using the gifts God has given them. The great poet, Robert Frost, once said, "The world is full of willing people: some willing to work, the rest willing to let them.

Jesus talked a lot about the use of money and possessions. Sixteen of the 38 parables are concerned with how to handle money and possessions. In the Gospels, an amazing one out of ten verses (288 in all) deal directly with the subject of money. The Bible offers 500 verses on prayer, less than 500 verses on faith, but more than 2,000 verses on money and possessions

What are we told not to do over and over in the Bible? Fear Not! Fear leads to a false conservatism. Fear leads to an imagined inability to step into the unknown. Fear leads to not try things previously untried. Fear prevents us from developing dormant skills and latent talents. When that happens, joy is traded for comfort, stewardship for endowments, and the hope of faith for the security of a "sure thing".

To return to my baseball analogy it's like playing not to lose rather than playing to win. It's having a 96% success rate like Max Carey, but producing 81 fewer stolen bases as Ty Cobb!

It doesn't stop there! Such anxiety and inaction produce a sense that one is a victim. Other people become responsible for life's trials. Remember how the one talent man accused the master of being a hard man and tried to make the master responsible? The servant said, "If you weren't such a hard master I might have tried to use my \$800 grand."

The greater the gift, the greater the possibility for colossal failure and therefore the greater temptation to play it safe, take no chances, dig bigger and better holes to bury and thus keep things secure. The fear, the blaming, the resentment, the sad knowledge that he is squandering a great gift and is guilty of faithlessness escalates until he is hopelessly caught - caught in a self-defeating cycle. He cannot act for fear of failure, but precisely that refusal to act is itself failure - and far worse than failure, it is UNFAITHFULNESS

Like an insect entangled in a spider's web, there is no way out. Help must come from the outside. And it does. Help does come from God. As Creator, God broke into the closed system by taking the first risk - the risk of entrusting his beloved creation to the likes of you and me. In the words of Genesis, he has given us dominion over all the earth.

But that is not all. Given that enormous responsibility, God knows that we will be tempted to either exploit our gifts and hopelessly abuse them or become so anxious over the enormity of the task that we will imitate the one talent man and retreat into self-defensive non-action, and let things go to ruin.

Yet, in Jesus Christ God takes the biggest risk of all. God breaks into our lives with forgiveness. That sort of forgiveness is precisely what it takes to shake the living daylights into us, and shock us into living - really living, to take the risks God empowers and enables us to take, and to make use of the talents and gifts he has entrusted to us.

Sure it's scary. Few things worthwhile are not. In fact, it's when we're scared that we HAVE to trust God instead of just ourselves! The trick is to be scared AND to take the risk. That's when we trust God who has trusted us with vast resources, with great gifts, and with lives overflowing with opportunities. That's life, and God called it good.

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly. Your security is in me and not in your frantic attempts to avoid risks and steer clear of failure. Look at Jesus on the cross: by the world's standards he looked to be a miserable failure. But the final victory belonged to him. He was lifted up to set you free. As Sustainer and Sanctifier of life, The Holy Spirit continues to meddle in our affairs. As counselor, God's Spirit gently and persistently guides us - and guides us always back to the God who says, "Go on. Live the life I give you. Enjoy it. Savor it. Share it.

We have work to do. We have risks to take. Jesus parable tells us that the reward for great faithfulness is NOT retirement on the beach, but even greater responsibility. The servant who was faithful and doubled his \$4 million to \$8 million got an extra \$800K. (to keep? NO! to use!) Put it in terms of fruit for the kingdom—the Master wants to see more than 100 for our 100th. God wants to see 16 million lives touched. There is not only no rest for the weary, there is no rest for the FAITHFUL!

There was a man who had a late conversion in life and asked to be baptized by immersion. The Pastor was of a denomination that usually baptized by sprinkling so he arranged to use the baptistery in the local Baptist Church. After coming up out of the water, the man's eyes got real big and he said, "Good grief, preacher, I forgot to take my wallet out of my pocket. It's dripping wet."

"Praise the Lord," exclaimed the preacher. "We could stand a few more baptized wallets around here."

Like the servants in this parable, we are entrusted with the talents God has given us, "each according to their ability." And that word talent can be understood both in our modern understanding of our gifts and abilities and the ancient

understanding of a large sum of money. God gives us both. We're simply the stewards or managers of what God has given us.

This parable warns us that if we have been gifted, if God has blessed us with certain talents, if God has entrusted us with specific resources and we don't put them to use and we don't take the risk and put them to use, not only will they not produce the fruit they are given to us in the first place, those gifts will be taken away and given to those who WILL take the risk and WILL put them to good use.

To use our gifts is responsible stewardship. To risk losing them is to live a life of faith and trust and so hear at the last these words addressed to you: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master."

I realize that we have come through some tough times. Some of us still have hurricane brain. I realize that some of us are not through the tough times yet. We all have to make sacrifices. We all have to make adjustments.

God has poured out spiritual blessings on us. In return, God only asks that we give back. God asks it not because God needs it. God asks it because God knows we need to let go of it. We need to experience the freedom from being possessed by our possessions.

God knows we need to risk, because in risking we have to trust God and not just ourselves. We have to empty our hands in order to be able to receive what's next. We have to play to win rather than play not to lose. Like Ty Cobb, we have to attempt to steal twice as many bases to be able to steal 44 more than Max Carey...and 62 more than Jose Altuve!

Each one of us is gifted by God. Not everyone can play the flute like Allison or the piano like Brenda or Nedra or the organ like Ella Rae. That's O.K. you are able to do some things that they aren't able to do.

Each of us has at least one gift. Maybe it's hospitality. Maybe it's administration. Maybe it's teaching. Maybe it's giving. Maybe it's handing out Thanksgiving bags like some of you did yesterday. What if we aspired to be Faith Presbyterian's MVP--Most Valuable Pray-er? Some of you used that gift this last Wednesday during our Prayer Vigil. What if we aspired to use our giving to fund ministries so others can use their gifts? What if we risked talking to others about our faith and our FAITH CHURCH like Lanie Garrett did in last Sunday's Baytown Sun article that I just shared this morning on my Facebook page? We might reach our goal of adding 100 new additions to our church family BEFORE our 100th birthday in 2022? In addition Lanie has volunteered to start posting the video of our worship services on You Tube, so starting next Sunday I would like for more of you to sit up front and center so it doesn't look like I'm only preaching to Betty Dugat.

The church isn't an organization to which you pay dues. The church is the family of God made up of followers of Jesus who have surrendered their lives, wallet and all. It is a family of people who give because they have been ... gifted.

Let's Pray. Dear Lord, whose gift of life includes abilities which demand responsibility, keep us faithful. May we commit our whole being to living the Christian life, that our discipleship may lead us into an ever growing and maturing experience of salvation through Christ.

Because your Spirit is in and with us we experience the fruit of the Spirit--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness humility, and self control. Because your Spirit is in and with us we exercise the gifts of the Spirit. Out of gratitude for these and for your many gifts we give back, not out of obligation or duty but out of gratitude and joy. We love you Lord, and we want to show our love by using the gifts you have given us.

We pray for the families that were blessed by the bags of food that we gave out yesterday. We pray for the families that are blessed each week by our Food Pantry our Animal Food Pantry, by Meals on Wheels. As we gather this week to give thanks, so many may not be sitting down at their familiar tables in their familiar homes because of natural and unnatural disasters. We pray for those for whom this Thanksgiving will have chairs left empty because of loved ones gone to be with the Lord. We especially pray for those mourning those losses because of mass shootings. We pray for those who are searching for a place to live, for those who are waiting for the restoration of where they used to live, for a place to use their talents in gainful employment, for those searching for a church to call home. All these things we pray in the name of Jesus.