

“Reflecting on Our Talents”

Matthew 25:14-30

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When we come to one of the New Testament parables, we need to understand them as the unique form of communication they are meant to be. Rather than over-analyzing every aspect of the parable story, we are urged to take the parable as a whole and to identify the one truth the storyteller wants us to grasp. In the parable for today, Jesus is the storyteller. And I would submit that the one take-away truth has to do with the notion that God gives each of us at least one spiritual gift, AND that God expects us to use that gift, or those gifts, to usher in the Day of Peace. And we can tell from the language of the parable that there is an urgency about this matter of using our spiritual gifts to usher in the Day of Peace. It's not something to be left on the back burner. It's a matter of highest priority.

I am often asked what the mission of our church is. Of course, I respond by saying our mission is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed. Our mission is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick. Our mission is to work for justice and peace. AND, our mission is to help each other identify the spiritual gifts God has bestowed upon us. That is part of our mission!

The term 'spiritual gifts' has a very broad definition. It includes everything from cooking tomato soup to writing poetry to painting landscapes to singing in the choir to welcoming a stranger to planting potatoes to praying and meditating to storytelling! The list is endless.

And that's one thing that makes congregational church life exciting, never a dull moment. So, when we join South Church, we enter a sacred covenant in which we promise to help each other discover what it is God has equipped us to do. It is especially rewarding for a pastor to witness this happening! I see this all the time with our youth and young adults, but also with every other age group. We're constantly discovering the talents God has given. Sometimes these talents remain hidden until retirement years. Sometimes it takes an extraordinary event to awaken us to our God-given talents. Sometimes they come to us in a dream.

This morning I am thinking of a South Church deacon back in the 1960's, Alden Tyrol. Alden was a home builder. He and his brother, Graham, built many of the houses in our town. But one day, Alden got an inspiration. He felt a divine nudging to go off to be the director of our Silver Lake Conference Center out in Sharon, CT. He talked this over with members of our church to get a little affirmation, to know he wasn't losing his mind. He and his wife, Ruth, went out there to build some retreat buildings, but mostly to build Christian community among our state's youth. He knew he had a talent for building. God told him to use that talent for building community. Many of our Connecticut clergy will testify to their calling arising from the Christian community they experienced under Alden's leadership at Silver Lake.

I think of Sophia Burkamp, one of our church school children. One day, shortly after the pandemic had set in, she just knew she wanted to write a song about this strange time and how to approach the unknown future with hope. Lyrics started coming into her head; then a tune; then she was singing the song she calls "The Earth Is Beautiful." She discovered she has a talent for composing music! And a talent for locating hope! Then, she shared that gift by singing "The Earth Is Beautiful" for our church worship in one of our virtual services!

I don't remember anything about the sermon that day, but I remember Sophia's song because it touched my heart. It brought us all a little bit of peace. This is what happens whenever anyone discovers their God-given talent and chooses to share it. It brings light to someone's darkness.

I think of Roman Green, now one of our Confirmation sponsors. In high school, he was a Boy Scout wanting to earn the Eagle Scout award. He had a talent for volleyball and a talent for building sandcastles at the beach. He put two and two together and hatched a plan to build a beach volleyball court out behind High Street School. Lots of neighborhood kids use it now. Roman named his gifts, put them to good use, and brought a little joy into our own backyard. He's an Eagle Scout! As a Confirmation sponsor, he may have an opportunity to help a current high school sophomore discern his unique talent and put it to work for the sake of peace.

When Jesus told that parable of the five talents and the two talents and the one talent, he was inviting people of faith to do this work of discernment, this work of discerning our spiritual gifts, and THEN, USING those gifts to transform sadness to joy, darkness to light, exclusion to inclusion, despair to hope.

The vitality of a church relies on its members investing their talent for love's own sake. Whenever this happens, that's when we know we're living in the greatest of hope! Amen.