

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
November 15, 2020 24th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A Matthew 25:14-30

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Our church council has begun their annual work to put together a budget for the coming year. "Budget" is kind of a misnomer. We don't have a set amount of income that we can count on. We only have our best guess from the previous years' offerings.

And I have to say here and now that your generosity this year, when so many of our members are not able to worship in person and drop their offerings in the plate themselves, has been reassuring about your commitment to the ongoing ministry of Zion Lutheran.

Let's call the church budget a finance plan. You entrust us with your offerings week after week, month after month, year after year. You trust the staff, church council, and the committees of our congregation to use your gifts wisely.

You trust us to keep our building in good shape, to pay our staff members a fair wage, and to send our congregation's offerings on to the places where God's work is carried out beyond our building and community, to places you or I may never set foot ourselves.

You trust your church and its leaders to take your gifts and do something with them!

The same is true for our household budgets. We each have some sort of income, whether that's from our employment, retirement accounts, investments, or Social Security. We use what we have, to do as much good as possible.

In the parable of the talents, three people are given a generous amount of money, with the expectation that they would use it wisely. The amount of money called a talent in those days was the equivalent of 15 years of a laborer's wage! Even the one who was given only one talent could have supported his family, probably for the rest of his life!

The word "talent" in the English language came from this exact story in the Bible. "Talent" has come to mean an innate gift, something we are naturally good at doing. We can certainly improve our talents through practice and building our skills.

But as our finance committee knows well, they each have a head for numbers that I don't have. I can learn the basics of budget development, but those who like numbers and understand the ins and outs of financial management are much better suited to lead our congregation in those ways than I am.

Our talents are how we are wired. They are God-given gifts. If that's true, and I believe it is, then this parable reminds us that every gift from God is entrusted to us to use in ways that will bring forth more.

Each of the servants in the parable understood that the talents given to them really belonged to another. They understood their role as serving their master, the one who gave them the talents in the first place. The ways they used their talents resulted in whether or not they would be entrusted with even more.

Now, we need to be really careful here. This is not about whether God blesses people with riches if they perform well enough. We call that works righteousness. God blesses each person in different ways, and it is up to us to recognize the abundance we have, even if it doesn't come in the form of financial wealth.

The key to this parable, is the relationship each of the servants has with their master. The key for our reading of it, is the relationship we have with God.

The first two servants received their talents and did something with them. They didn't argue about who had more. They understood that each of them was given "according to his ability."

One of the hardest things for us who live in a capitalist society is to avoid the trap of keeping score. We are bombarded with advertising that tells us we need to have what our neighbor has and then some—whether that's a green and weed-free lawn, the number of presents under our Christmas trees, or the status of a magazine picture-perfect home. God gifts us according to the life God is calling us to live.

The third servant was afraid of the master. He saw the master as commanding and manipulative. He feared punishment more than he trusted the master. And once again we hear the threat of being thrown into the outer darkness. Maybe for some people the threat of separation from God is a real motivator. I don't find that threat helpful for my life of faith.

When our relationship with God is based on God's love for us, and on God's trust in us to do the best we can with what are given, then we see the abundance in our lives as gifts from God to be used freely and generously, in the spirit in which they are given.

So, let's think about some of the "talents" or the gifts we might have. What are some things we have been entrusted with, to use and to care for, so that others are blessed by them and God is glorified?

- Something we're good at doing—our instincts and passions
- Money/Assets—land, property, possessions, income
- Ourselves—our bodies, minds, relationships, roles of leadership, our experiences
- The earth

Once we recognize these as gifts from God, our view of God is reflected in how we respond to God's generosity.

Do we see God as demanding and punishing? I'm not sure the "master" in this parable really was "a harsh man" who used his servants for his own gain. But since that was the perception of the third servant, that was the master he had.

Or do we see God as generous, entrusting us to care for and put to use the good things in our lives? Our response then, would be found in a kind of freedom to be as generous with others as the One who has given so much to us.

The most valuable "talent"—the most abundant gift—we have been given by God is God's own Son, Jesus Christ, who came to the world and gave all he had, his own life, so that we would have an abundant life—now and in God's kingdom yet to come.

In Holy Baptism we were sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with cross of Christ forever. It is the Holy Spirit that builds up faith in us. Our responsibility in receiving this gift of faith is to live into the kingdom of heaven—to use our talents to bring about a world where the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are fed, and all will know the abundance of God’s love and gifts for them. A world where love reigns in every heart.

During our musical offering this morning I invite you to consider God’s generosity toward you. Take out a pen and write some ideas on your bulletin.

- Reflect on your talents, your passions that bring you joy and inspire you.
- Reflect on your possessions—the money you have, the place you live, the wealth you have more than enough of.
- Reflect on yourself—your body, your mind, and the people God has placed in your life to love and to be responsible for.
- Reflect on this amazing world God has given us—with its resources. Are we using and preserving the land and water for the good of all people and creatures?
- Reflect on your faith—your relationship with God, the giver of life.

Choose one of these “talents” or gifts. Talk with your spouse or your friends about the talent that you are now seeing in a new light—as a gift from God to be used for God’s good purposes.

God trusts us, dear friends, to care for and share the abundant life we have been given. Let us use our gifts well and enter into the joy of our generous God!

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Longing for Christ's reign to come among us, we pray for the outpouring of God's power on the church, the world, and all in need.

A brief silence.

We pray, O God, for the church in our community and throughout the world. Raise up and sustain believers to use their talents to assist with worship and to lead congregational ministries. We pray especially for our sisters and brothers at First Presbyterian Church as they seek a new pastor. Grant them patience and trust in you as they wait. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Lord of creation, we stand in awe at the works of your hands and praise you for the beauty of nature. Open our eyes to the gifts of land, water, and air that you have entrusted into our care. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Lord of the nations, we give thanks for those who have heard your call to serve as our leaders. Remind government officials and citizens alike that this country is a gift from you, as a tool to care for all people in our borders. Help us to use government funding wisely. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Lord of all in need, open our hearts to use the gifts and talents we have to comfort the grieving, tend the sick, and reach out to the lonely. We pray especially for those with ongoing prayer concerns and for our homebound members listed in our bulletin, and for those we name now before you... Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Lord of the living and the dead, we give you thanks for all the saints at rest from their labors. Rouse us to live by their example, that others may also know your love. Gracious God,
Your kingdom come.

Receive our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, until that day when you gather all creation around your throne where you will reign forever and ever.
Amen.