

Sermon 28a 2017: Using Our Gifts in Response to the God Who Loves Us

Introduction: Stewardship and God's Identity

This Sunday morning, we find ourselves in the final weeks of the old Church year;

We're at the end before we start again to live into the greatest story ever told;

The story of Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, the promise He's with us always;

The coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives;

And our new life with God and one another.

And in these final weeks of the old Church year, we are confronted with final things;

With where we are going and what is most important in our lives with God.

Most years at this time, we're given glimpses of the end time;

We're given visions of judgment day in some of the readings;

Challenging us and in some years seemingly threatening us with the reality

That we are responsible for how we've lived our lives.

We're challenged with whether or not we've been faithful stewards of the gift of our lives;

And whether we've been good and faithful stewards of the gifts and talents;

God has given each one of us and all of us together.

This Sunday's Gospel includes one of those glimpses of the end times

And how we have been called to live our lives;

And it's a story that has often brought a wry smile on many faces in the fall;

A little smirk, because the Church has chosen to use this Gospel story of the talents;

When most Episcopal churches, St. David's included;

Are in the midst of their annual financial stewardship campaigns.

And on the level of the stewardship campaign and getting pledges from one another

For next year's mission and ministry, it's kind of a stewardship softball, isn't it?

A set up for the preacher to hit by preaching on our call to use our gifts for God;

Because this story of the talents involves actual money

That has been entrusted to the servants of the Master;
And the highest and best use of that money.

But if this story only has to do with stewardship and getting all of us to give more;
As we consider how we can be the best stewards of all that God has given us;
Then I believe we're missing out on the deeper meaning,
The more important meaning of Jesus' parable of the talents.

You see Jesus always tells stories with several layers of meaning to lead us to God;
To show us the face of this God who loves us and wants to bring us life in abundance
Who offers a living relationship with the Creator and Redeemer of all that is.

Jesus tells stories that we can readily understand because it touches on our lives;
He tells stories that we can relate to as in this case with the talents and investing;
But His main interest is in showing us who God is;
And the love and grace and generosity that God offers each of us on our own;
And all of us together as this community of St. David's Church.

And while it's a good story to remind us about our call to share and to be generous;
To make a pledge and to fulfill our pledge this coming year;
The story has so much more to say about who we believe God is
And how we will live our lives in response to this God.

Jesus is asking us in today's story, "Which God are you giving to?"
Or as my Mom would've corrected me, "To whom are you giving?"

Are we giving to a God who gives gifts to us freely, generously, lovingly?
Gifts, talents, for our enjoyment and for the good of others?
Or a harsh demanding God who calls us to earn our way into His good graces?

It's an important distinction and one that generally connects us to God today and every day;
Or one that keeps God at a distance and robs us of any chance of having a relationship
And living our lives in love, in joy, in peace;
And with a hope for whatever is to come today and at the end of time.

The Gospel and Gifts

The predominant view of God in the parable of the talents is a God who gives;
A God, a Master, who gives generously, and invites us to use whatever gifts we have;
However we wish or feel called to use them.

Notice the Master doesn't tell them what to do with all they've been given
But simply entrusts it to them;
They, we, choose how to use the talents or not.

And this is a generous God because a talent is a lot to be giving anyone;
A talent in Jesus' day was the highest form of measurement;
Roughly 72 pounds of something;
So, if it were gold that was being entrusted to the servants, that would mean
\$10 mm to the first servant, \$4 mm to the second and \$2 mm to the third;
I don't know about you, but that sounds incredibly generous.

The Master is entrusting, the Master is trusting His servants to take care of what's been given
However they choose until He comes again;
And when He comes again or comes into our lives to see how we're doing;
He often gives us more, entrusts us with more as in Jesus' story;
And the gifts grow and the relationship with the Master deepens.

That's what God has done with you and me – given us talents, though not necessarily in gold.
He's given some of us singing voices to use as we wish – in the choir, in the car,
Sometimes in the shower;
A gift that can be used for our enjoyment and for the enjoyment of others, including God;
And when we use this gift it grows, by our use and by God giving us more of it.

The Master has given some of us physical gifts for sports or just to enjoy exercise;
God has given us some of us brains to solve crossword puzzles and word jumbles;
And to create a better world through invention and good management;
God has given us the gift and capacity to love: to love those within our own families
To love those around us and to love others whom we may never know;
And when we use any of these gifts, these talents, they never diminish, but only grow.

The generosity and delight of the Master, of God, in Jesus' story
Is reflected in the first two servants who use their gifts and allowing them to grow;
Just as it's evidenced in your life and mine, whatever gift or gifts we've been given;
And the use of the gift gives pleasure and life to us and to the giver Himself, to God.

This is the God of Jesus, the God Jesus is showing us in His life and ministry,
Showing us in His death and resurrection, the God of the parable of the talents
Who loves us and trusts us and wants us to be in relationship with him;
Whether we use our gifts effectively, with a clear return or growth;
Or whether we use the gifts effectively and things don't work out as we planned;
As long as we use what has been entrusted to us, God is pleased.

That's why the great Christian theologian, St. Augustine of Hippo could write,
"Love God and do as you please" or my preferred translation, "Love God and sin boldly."
But we know there's another view of god in the story, isn't there;
A god who is harsh and demanding, who reaps where he doesn't sow;
A god of rulemaking and score keeping; a god who is temperamental;
The god who demands that we do something with what we've been given;
Who one day will give an accounting for what we have or haven't done.

Like the third servant in the story, most of us have heard and imagined this god in our lives a lot;
And we're so afraid of him that we can only think to bury our gifts and hope for the best.

This is the god made in our image; the god who is like many of us;
The god who expects a specific kind of return or result from others;
The god who drives us and others into a life of drudgery and fear and guilt
In our inability to ever measure up;
A god who makes us afraid and one with whom
We would rather not spend too much time, thank you very much.

Too many of us consider God to be like this;
We are saved by grace, we say, but then we have to earn God's love by how we live;
We have to measure up by how effective we are in using our gifts;
And unless we do, we will find no favor with God.

But I'm here to tell you this morning that this is the small "g" god;
And nothing like the Master in the story who is generous and giving and trusting;
Remember how much even the third servant was given.

This small 'g' god is nothing and no one like the God we worship and serve in this place;
Nothing like the God who freely gives us gifts; who loves us just as we are;
The God who sent His Son to show us His face of love;
Who took away the power of sin and death when we didn't and don't deserve it;
So that we may life and all that life has for us now and beyond the door of death;
The God who gives us the Holy Spirit and natural and spiritual gifts and is ready to give us more.

And the third servant who sees the Master as harsh and demanding
The servant who has the talent he buried taken away from him;
The third servant is already in a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth;
Because he doesn't know the Master and is not in relationship with him;
And wasn't using the talent anyway.

Use the Gifts

So in this year of being empowered by the Holy Spirit

Use the gifts that God has given you;

Cherish and expand them; give them away;

Use them and give them, not so that you deserve God's love and respect and relationship;

But because you already have God's love, respect and friendship.

No, use them because God loves you and me so much

And is simply interested in you using the gifts He's given you and will give you

As a sign of your relationship with Him today and always.

It's an amazing life to which we have been called

An incredible life when we remember whom we worship and whom we serve.

How we use our gifts in a personal relationship with God

As individuals and as this community of St. David's

Has nothing to do with earning our way into God's good graces;

And everything to do with the gracious, loving God who gives gifts

And is ready and willing and able to give us more.

Amen.