

Sermon – 24th Pentecost
Matthew 25:14-30
November 19, 2017

“Living Usefully...Living Abundantly”

Routinely poor performances on college exams eventually led me to conclude that a) I hadn't studied hard or effectively, b) I wasn't particularly bright in the first place, or c) my preferred rationale - I just wasn't a good “*test taker*.” Tests are unnerving - they put you on the spot and say “*here, perform!*” and there's usually a lot riding on them. Unless I “aced” a test, which was rare, I would leave the classroom convinced tests were a lousy way of measuring knowledge in the first place –and then go to the student union for a large yogurt cone!

So it rather “unnerves” me to preach this story of the “talents” because I imagine God as a professor and me as the guy who didn't take tests well, with a talent in one hand and a shovel in the other digging a hole! I hear “talents” and I see little blue exam books or a syllabus and I will be tested on how well I did in making more of them. It may appear to be more like a “*take home*” exam than a classroom one but the point is still “*performance matters.*” What bothers me about this story all the more is that the good students just seem to keep piling up “A's” and the “poor test takers”, to put it mildly, are encouraged to seek another career path.

The trouble with this view of the parable is that Jesus spent virtually the whole of his ministry commending poor students – sinners - by saying it was for them he had come with good news and denouncing the good students – the righteous - by calling them hypocrites or worse. So what does this parable mean? Well, if like last week's parable of the bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13 it's only a warning about the end times then it would be too heavenly minded to do us any earthly good. I said last week that the story of the bridesmaids urges us to “*live expectantly*” meaning we're to live “expecting” to participate in God's work on earth, not just wait on a celebration in heaven.

In today's parable a man goes away on a long trip. While away, he entrusts to three servants' different amounts of money proportionate to each's ability – whatever that means. The master evidently knew his servants well - unfortunately only two of the three servants knew their master well. The man expresses displeasure only with the servant who read him wrong – who believed him to be a hard man not a merciful one and didn't want to be a part of his master's business. The conclusion of this story seems the epitome of unfairness. There I am, the nervous student again, who for lack of “*test taking ability*” needs to be thinking of a change in my major. Overlooked is that the action of the master is not caused by the inability of the servant to pass the test, invest his life in doing something, being the brightest or the hardest worker, but in his refusal to pick up his pencil at all and to invest in a great master.

Do you want to share in your master Jesus' happiness? Do you want to run toward Jesus or do you want to run away? This parable is not about the end times but the meantime. The parable of the Bridesmaids was about living expectantly. This one is about living usefully, which also means living abundantly. There is an old adage that says in life some people don't know what is happening, others watch what is happening, others wish that things would happen, and still others hinder things from happening. Then there are those who make things happen. That is the person Jesus calls each of us to be - according to our ability.

Steven Jobs had some ability. He was one of the greatest entrepreneurs of the 20th century, co-founder of the Apple Computer Company - the largest industrial corporation in the world. I think my kids have nearly spent enough on Mr. Jobs' products to qualify as shareholders. In the 1990's when his company was in a bit of a lull product development wise Mr. Jobs decided a man named John Sculley was needed to help him fulfill his dream of building a completely different kind of computer company - one that he and precious few others saw as putting computers in the palms of our hands. Mr. Sculley was quite comfortable as president of the PepsiCo Corporation - makers of the soft drink Pepsi. The thought of a career change requiring him to learn a new business dependent on unproven technology scared him.

In his own words he was concerned about *"the pragmatic stuff that preoccupies the middle-aged."* John Sculley's internal barometer told him he was safe and happy at PepsiCo. It also told him he was getting bored. Steven Jobs asked him a pointed question - *"do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?"* What can a man say to that? John Sculley went to Apple and helped it throughout the 90's become the most innovative technology corporation in the world. He admitted later he didn't know a thing about phones - but he trusted the guy who did - the guy who trusted in him and knew he needed him. Living usefully means living in trust of the God who trusts you - with the astounding knowledge that God has something for you to do. Errors are allowed - idleness isn't.

Helen Keller once said: *"I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish all tasks as if they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the combined tiny pushes of each honest worker."*

Your life belongs to God. You are accountable to God with it. One day you must give it back, so says our parable today. Whether we offer tiny pushes or big shoves each are received with the most beautiful words human ears could hear - *"well done good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness."* Oh my, did this poor test taker just hear the promise of an "A."

AMEN