

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BLUE HILL
NOVEMBER 19, 2023, Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

USE IT OR LOSE IT

Let's pray: Dear God, we ask You to bless both our minds and our hearts as we consider the parable of the talents and strive to hear what you are saying to us in this passage. AMEN

A cursory reading of this Scripture selection seems to bring us a pretty obvious message. "Use it or lose it." But we're going to do a somewhat deeper dive into just what that might entail.

In the previous chapter, Jesus has just been talking about judgement, the end times, and His return. Now He is using parables to teach His disciples, and by inference, us how we are meant to live until the end, whether that be the end times when an asteroid crashes into the earth and blows us all to bits, or, for us individually, more likely, the end of our own earthly lives.

I'd like us to first consider the word "talent".

Some English translations of the original Greek New Testament substitute the English word "talent" and instead say such things as "He gave five bags of gold to one, two bags of gold to another, and one bag of gold to the last". (that's from the New Living Bible) Or, from Eugene Peterson's Contemporary translation, "To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third, one thousand."

However, the Greek word ta'lanta, the direct translation of which is "talent", is not in fact a skill or talent in the English sense. Nor is it a monetary figure; rather, it is a measure of weight. Depending on which Biblical "expert" you choose to trust, this weight might be equal to 66 lbs., to 75 lbs., or to 90 lbs. The actual monetary value of the talent was dependent upon what metal was being weighed, be it copper, gold, or silver. These were the most commonly used metals to weigh goods against equivalents.

In this parable, the talents were not given to the servants to keep; they were on loan from the master in hopes that the servants would use them wisely to the master's advantage.

In this parable, the word "talents" can represent money, or material wealth. It can also, of course, represent what our word "talents" means in English, ie. skills or characteristics, such as an artistic eye, athletic skill, linguistic abilities, musical talent, or the capacity to think in both concrete and abstract modes or to the ability to work complex mathematical problems.

There are personality characteristics that we could consider talents: empathy; compassion; doggedness or perseverance; the tendency to look on the bright side of things (optimism) even in the face of hardship and pain; a sharp intellect. There are also ACQUIRED blessings that could qualify as talents: experience in specific fields; experience in life that enables us to develop life skills; education; a good reputation; healthy and rewarding personal relationships. Some of these attributes we may want to claim are because we utilized our other gifts well. Indeed there is truth to that, but, in fact, the ability to utilize those talents to the best advantage is, in fact a talent in and of itself.

There are gifts on loan from God that could be considered talents in the context of this parable, but that wouldn't necessarily be the first things that we would think of as gifts. What about our challenges? Maybe at first glance, you wouldn't want to see your challenges as gifts or talents given to you by God. Perhaps you have a chronic health problem, or find yourself on the autism spectrum. You could be one of those in our community who is experiencing financial hardship. Maybe you grew up impoverished. Could you have had a mother or father who had very poor parenting skills that left you damaged or with unhealthy family relationships. But God offers us the strength and courage to handle these issues and, if we choose to accept God's guidance, we can. Nobody ever said that this would be easy. We may not be able to make these problems go away, but we can, if we accept the help that God offers us, deal with them.

And what about our responsibilities? Some of us may have children or elderly parents who are dependent upon us and whose care requires a great deal of our time, our love, our ingenuity, and even our physical labor. Some of us have jobs with

great responsibility and with many people who look to us for guidance and to keep the organizational ball rolling smoothly.

So do we see these challenges as burdens or as gifts? Why would any of these things be considered gifts or talents on loan from God? Don't some of them sound more like hardships to be endured? Maybe we even do so grudgingly

Well, we could choose to go the way of the third man to whom the master gave just one talent. We could try to bury these unpleasant, less than delightful situations, heave a sigh, and just try to get through each day hoping that things don't get any worse. Or, we could choose (and it is a choice) to be grateful, grateful that God is with us, ALWAYS, with us when we sitting pretty enjoying our many blessings, and also with us when we are being challenged. These may be the times that it is most important to pay attention, to pray, as Paul says, "without ceasing"; and to consciously purpose to thank God as we are experiencing these challenges and accept the gift of strength to utilize our challenges for our own growth and maturity as well as to bring us closer to God.

This brings us to the topic of gratitude, one that is not clearly embedded in this parable, but one that is implicit and so very necessary for our emotional and spiritual health.

As we look at how the master in this story rewards the servants who used their talents wisely, we don't see them being invited to keep a portion or percentage of the take as payment for a job well done. Instead, we see the master telling them that he's going to give the two servants who used their talents well even more responsibility. Does that seem like a gift? MORE responsibility? Yikes! Just when they thought they were going to get a chance to rest, to go on vacation, or at least have a "staycation". Now they have even more work to do!

Do you suppose that they are feeling grateful? I suspect that, indeed, yes they are. In Greek, the word used to describe the three men is "DOULOS". "Doulos" has two meanings; it can be translated "servant" as it is in this passage that we just read from Matthew. But it can also be translated "slave", as it is in some other versions of this scripture and in other parts of the New Testament. It is not unlikely that these men were slaves, given that slavery was a commonly accepted practice in Roman

culture at that time, and that most wealthy people, such as this master was, had multiple slaves.

The three men to whom the master gave talents could have been either servants or slaves. Either way, the master was entrusting them with a sizeable chunk of his wealth, in part because he was going to be away for a long period and would not be home to manage his own affairs, but perhaps also because he wanted to test these men, to assess them, to see if they would use good judgement and prove themselves worthy of his trust.

Servants and even slaves in this culture, who were trusted by their masters and who accepted lots of responsibility, often lived well. They were well clothed. They were able to move about in the community freely. They received high quality food, and they were respected. Slaves who reached the pinnacle of trust and respect, and who served their masters faithfully for long periods of time were sometimes freed as their ultimate reward.

The third man in this parable, the one who did not use well even the one talent he was given, had disrespected the master, badmouthing him right to his face. He was not rewarded with more responsibility. In fact, his one talent was taken away and he was banished, as the passage says, "into outer darkness". In other words, he was separated from the relative security of the master's household and left to fend for himself.

The two servants who had used their talents wisely, were given not only more responsibility and opportunity for advancement, but implicit in the story, more of the benefits that came with responsibility, and potentially, if they were in fact slaves, the possibility of freedom in their future. Not only were they likely to be happy with this reward, and expression of the master's trust, despite the hard work that this would have entailed, but they were likely ecstatic about the implications for their future that this reward carried.

I believe that we can safely assume that these two men were overwhelmingly grateful not just for the talents they were first given, but for the rewards they were given for having used their talents to the best of their ability in order to please and to serve and to honor the master.

Some of the implications for us in this lesson are blatantly obvious. We must take the gifts we are given and “use them or lose them”. We have been given so very much that it can be difficult to even enumerate our blessings.

For starters, we live in Maine. It just doesn't get much better than that! We are surrounded by the beauty of God's creation with our rivers and lakes and beaches and woods. We can use that gift in so many ways. We can go exploring with our children or grandchildren and teach them about the flora and fauna that we see around us and how to continue to respect and protect the earth that God has given us. We can find beautiful places in which to pray and meditate. There is certainly an abundance of these right here in our own little village. If we have the gift, the talent, we can get creative and write poetry, paint pictures, or play or compose music that will inspire others to care for God's creation.

We live relatively comfortable lives compared to much of the world: we have shelter, warmth, and food, the basic necessities of life and in some cases, much more. We can follow in the footsteps of others from our congregation who have chosen to share what they have, those who started the Tree of Life food pantry, or have contributed to the Dolly Fisher Emergency Fund to help provide heating fuel, food, and electricity to those in need. We could consider taking in a refugee or an international student to help build relationships, not only with that individual but by extension, around the world.

Here in the United States, we have the freedom to worship God in the way that we choose, something we all too often take for granted. We are neither forbidden to worship nor forced to worship gods whom we don't know. We can graciously honor that freedom for others who may choose to worship differently. We can work to build strong cooperative relationships with other faith communities, those who share our ethos and our desire to help others.

We are free to speak our minds about politics, religion, and lifestyle...and often do so with gusto. When we see our legislators going awry, we can write letters, make phone calls, and campaign for and support those whom we believe are doing the right thing. We can support and advocate for those who are victims of bigotry or persecution because of their religion or their lifestyle. And we can model the tolerance that we so ardently believe in.

We live in a caring community and are part of a caring faith community that shows its caring in concrete ways. We can continue to pray for one another and for those in the world who are so clearly in need of prayer. If we are capable, we can financially support our church and our community organizations that care for people. We can give of our time to help out with these organizations.

Clearly, none of us has the time, and the ability, and the energy to do everything. But God has given EVERY ONE OF US gifts and talents. We are not, as we learn in this parable, to bury them, or just to let them be frittered away. If we don't use them, we will lose them.

Thanksgiving is coming up in a few days. It is not a Judeo-Christian holiday; technically, it's not even a religious holiday, and is not on our liturgical calendar. Although the US is not the only country in the world that has instituted a Thanksgiving or something similar as a federal holiday, it is, in fact a secular one. However, the fact that it is a secular holiday has never stopped those Americans who believe that all gifts originate with God from giving thanks to God, to Allah, to Jesus, to Yahweh, to Elohim, or to whomever we accept as our higher power. Our own Scriptures are rife with expressions of Thanksgiving. At least 30 of the Psalms are Psalms of thanksgiving. It's wonderful that we have a special day that is devoted to being grateful. But in our lives as followers of God, we are meant to be grateful EVERY day, and grateful in EVERYTHING.

As Paul says in his first letter to the Thessalonians, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." He does NOT say "Be thankful FOR all circumstances." Rather, he says "Be thankful IN all circumstances." No matter how severe are our challenges, God is there for us, giving us strength and courage and helping us to grow in our faith. And if we accept those gifts, and with God's help, use them well, we will continue to receive more and more, and will be enormously blessed both now and forever.