

In our gospel lesson we find Jesus talking with his listening audience about living life in the kingdom of God. In the 25th chapter of Matthew Jesus uses three parables to describe life in the realm of God. This weekend's lesson encourages each of us to use our talents and abilities to their fullest extent. This dovetails in well with our membership commitment as United Methodists as we make a commitment to support our local church, St. Paul, with our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness. This weekend is Commitment weekend as we conclude our financial stewardship campaign for the 2018 budget but we all know stewardship includes sharing time, talents as well as finances.

I would like to explore this lesson with you from two angles. Please give me some creative license in this process. I know that "talents" in our lesson refer to money but I am going to reference talents as personal abilities. It is our talents that enable us to earn money so I will take some creative license with this parable. As we know, parables are not stories with hard and fast facts but they are stories encouraging us to stretch our imagination as we think of living as children of God.

Matthew 25:

¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

First, let's look at the temptation to think that our talents (money or personal abilities) are limited and therefore out of sorrow or shame we do not use what is at our disposal; like the individual in the parable "who received the one talent and went off and dug a hole in the ground" to hide it.

Whenever we are tempted to think that our talents are inadequate or we don't have what it takes for the task at hand it is good to remember various scenes from the movie "Forrest Gump." That movie is just one big parable. Has everyone seen the movie Forrest Gump? If not, I encourage you to find it online or get a DVD and watch it with family over the holidays. It is a classic.

Forrest Gump, born in poor in the south, is limited in the talent department. No one would debate that. Early on in life he has physical limitations and throughout life he has intellectual limitations. Yet, Forrest has a heart that is unlimited. Again and again he helps those who don't even think they want his help. This happens with Lieutenant Dan, his commanding officer in Viet Nam. Lieutenant Dan gets shot in battle in Viet Nam, taking out his legs and he calls in the bombers to wipe out the enemy which will take his life as well. As Lieutenant Dan calls in the bombers he knows that he will continue the proud tradition of men in his family that died in battle. Then Forrest Gump shows up, picks Lieutenant Dan up, carries him to safety as Lieutenant Dan screams at him to leave him there so he can fulfill his destiny of dying with honor in battle. If you remember the movie, Lieutenant Dan detests Forrest for what he has now become, a double amputee veteran. It takes decades for Lieutenant Dan to understand his rescue by Forrest as a blessing.

Not only does Forrest help those who initially don't think they want his help but he also helps many persons in ways unknown to him. One illustration of this is during his run across America as he is working through disappointment in his life. Unbeknownst to him, Forrest becomes an inspiration in unique ways for individuals as well as an inspiration for the multitudes. Forrest reminds us that God can use the smallest talents in a person's life in wonderful ways if our heart is powered by love.

Let go back and look at this parable from Jesus from one more angle.

Matthew 25:

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Let's say that we have received the five talents or two talents and we want to make sure they produce, that is, we're motivated. We understand that God has gifted us in a variety of ways and we have high expectations on getting a return on our talents. We don't just want to double the return, as is case for the parable, but we want to do even better. That can certainly be seen as a virtue. Fully utilizing our talents is a virtue unless we lose healthy balance in our lives.

Let me reference myself in a cautionary manner. At the age 50 I think I noticed a little burnout in my life after serving local churches for 25 years. I decided to take a change of pace and worked in a non-profit where I was not the lead staff person. I enjoyed a few years at the Open Door Mission doing just that. It was nice but I missed being in the local church and returned in the summer of 2013.

I was re-energized and excited. When I arrived at Waverly I was ready to use all my talents to make a difference. I pushed the pedal to the metal and we got a lot done. Ten years previous to my arrival at Waverly they had added on a wonderful gathering space to the entrance of their church and had paid off all but \$150,000 on their loan from that project. When I arrived I was told that the one thing they did not accomplish in that building addition was a most needed elevator that would move from the main floor up to the second floor and down to the basement. I checked the cost and it was \$300,000. We had it designed and installed before the end of my second year there. By the end of my third year we had the elevator paid off along with the previous debt. They were debt free. I pushed the pedal to the metal. In addition to that endeavor we grew our mission work and worship attendance grew 15%. Then I received an invitation to become Lead Pastor here at St. Paul.

Marjorie and I arrived here July 1, 2016. I was greeted by a wonderful and warm congregation along with an excellent staff. Yet, I saw a history of significant deficit spending that needed to be corrected. I pushed my foot to the gas pedal even more. What we have accomplished together here in the last year as we have established a balanced budget and laid the foundation for a sustainable future has been amazing. Thanks be to God. Amen!

This summer I turned my focus on membership decline that has been steady for over thirty years. I jumped into some training provided by our Great Plains Conference and was blessed by 11 people here at St. Paul who said "yes" to be on our new Vision Team to intentionally step out to grow our ministry and membership. The pedal has been on the metal.

Do you know what happens to your car when you press down on the gas and don't let up for an extended time? Not good for the engine. What if you just keep driving at top speed and don't take regular maintenance breaks? You do that and you will probably hear a pop or two coming from under the hood. I have felt more than a pop or two from underneath my hood. You know what I have done over the past 4 and ½ years when I heard or felt a pop from underneath the hood? I pushed harder on the gas pedal so the roar of the engine would drown out those cautionary pops. Finally, this October my schedule was as full as I ever. Then out of the blue during a dinner conversation at home on Sunday evening October 29th a valve, piston, gasket or something under my hood exploded. I had an emotional meltdown. Fell asleep that night and woke up knowing repair was needed.

I called Chad Anglemyer, (my boss, friend and District Superintendent) Monday afternoon. He came over and with wonderful pastoral care listened to me spill out a whole lot of emotion. It was like he took off my over heated radiator cap and let all the steam rush out. That was helpful. The next two days I had similar conversations with Pastor Marta and then Pastor Jerry. I am so lucky to work with each of them. They are so loving and supportive. Well, we developed a plan. I am easing my foot off the gas pedal for November, December and January.

This will provide some space for me to gain balance in my life by establishing a good exercise routine, a better eating pattern, more time in prayer & reading the scriptures, go to counseling and get some rest. Jim Madison, our Staff Parish Chair, has been informed and is supportive. Marjorie, my wife, is very supportive and relieved. I ask for your prayerful support. In this time period I will be taking Tuesdays and Fridays off. Rev. Marta Wheeler, who is part-time, has agreed to cover those days in addition to her regular ministry here. As I said, I

am blessed. By the end of January I hope to have established a healthy balance for my body, soul and mind that will prove to be good for me, Marjorie and St. Paul.

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When we look at this parable of Jesus I invite us to remember two things today. First, God has gifted each of us. God will bless our gifts, large and small, as we maintain love in our hearts. Second, we are to use our gifts and talents within the context of a balanced life. That is why the first guidelines we received from God, the Ten Commandments, give us instruction to have a Sabbath day each week. God knows we need rest and balance in our lives. Sometimes even Pastors forget this. Talents given to us by God (one, two or five) are to be a blessing. The talents are not intended to be points of stress and when used in moderation they are wonderful blessings.

As we turn in our cards in support of the St. Paul 2018 budget this Commitment weekend or soon thereafter we trust they will be enough because they come with our prayers and God's blessing upon them. Amen.