

FAITHFULNESS: USING GOD GIVEN GIFTS

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Scripture text: Matthew 25:14-30; Matthew 5:38-48

It is so good to be with you here at Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship. Joan and I have looked forward to this time of sharing and fellowship. Berne, Indiana is holy ground for me, because of the many deep friendships that we have had over the years, beginning in 1960, when we first began our conversation about starting a new Mennonite Church in Ft. Wayne. We will always be indebted to you for all of your acts of kindness and generosity, by helping us in church planting not only in Fort Wayne but also in Denver.

For the message today, I am using one of the Lectionary scriptures, Matthew 25, as the basis for the sermon, namely the familiar Parable of the Talents. Originally, a talent was not a coin, but a measurement of weight. The value depended on the metal that was being weighed, whether it was copper, silver or gold.

The story is simple enough. The master was preparing to leave on a journey and he entrusted his property to his servants. To one servant he gave five talents, to another two talents and to still another, one talent.

The servants with five and two talents went out and traded and earned more. The one talent servant went out and buried his master's money in the ground. To bury one's money in the ground was not uncommon in those days—they had no banks like we have today. To hide money in the field was relatively safe. Incidentally, I might add, that keeping money in a box in the ground rather than keeping it invested, may not have been such a bad idea for some of us during the past eighteen months.

The story unravels when the Master returns, and asks each of the servants to give an account of their stewardship. In the original context, the parable undoubtedly spoke pointedly to the Scribes and Pharisees, whose aim it was to keep the Old Testament law exactly as they had always interpreted it, without being open to the fulfillment which Jesus brought. It was a case of the “closed mind” –not being open to opportunities. This described the servant who hid his talent in the ground. But the parable also speaks to all of us in relation to our gifts and abilities and financial resources.

So we ask, “What truths can we draw from this parable? First of all, the parable clearly shows that we do not all receive the same number of talents in life. Our abilities differ, the parable says. To one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one—each according to his ability. God does not give the same degree of ability to each person. This is simply a given fact. This may at first seem unfair, but as we stop to think about it, it may also be a blessing. The five talent person carries a tremendous responsibility, far

more than what many of us would find comfortable.

What we need to learn from this parable is, that happiness is not dependent upon the number of talents that God has given to us, nor the ability given, but rather, what we do with those talents which God has given to us--and of course, we are here referring to far more than money. It includes our skills, our intellect, our personality, our empathy with people, our relational qualities, gifts of administration, the gift of teaching or counseling and many other gifts.

Let me illustrate. For my alternative service, I served for two years as an orderly in a contagious disease hospital in Los Angeles. Most of the patients were suffering from polio, since the Salk vaccine had not yet been discovered. Working in a hospital was quite a change for me, growing up as a farm boy in Kansas. Working around nurses and doctors was fascinating for me, as I admired their skills and observed how much good they were doing for these patients. The thought came to me, "Wouldn't it be a fulfilling vocation to become a doctor and help all these patients?" But I knew that I didn't have the special gifts in science to become a medical doctor.

However, I discovered something else in that hospital. I often visited with some of the polio patients who were confined in an iron lung. A young woman with two children, whose husband also had polio, looked up at me, and said, "Len, I think you should become a pastor." That made an impression on me and set me in the direction of thinking of becoming a pastor.

Another observation in this parable is that the five talent person and the two talent person received identical affirmation. The Master said, "Well done, good and faithful servant, you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master." What this says to me is that the important matter is not the number of talents we receive, but rather, what we do with what God gives to us.

Herein lies the challenge of life.

Happiness therefore does not necessarily rest in receiving the largest number of talents but rather in working with the talents that we DO receive. Fulfillment comes when we develop to the greatest potential, the talents that God has given to us, in order to serve Jesus Christ most effectively.

In other words, the goal as I see it, is to become all that we can become, not to enhance ourselves, but to serve Jesus Christ as faithfully as we can.

I once saw a plaque in a college student's room that read, "What you are, is God's gift to you, what you make of yourself, is your gift to God."

Many of us have had the opportunity to attend high school, college and even graduate school, where we have been able to further develop the gifts and abilities that God has given to us.

This parable also has a warning. If we bury the gifts and talents that God has given to us we will lose them.

We may be tempted to say, “What can I do with only one talent?” We become afraid to venture out and try. We can become stifled in our own fears--afraid that we will not measure up to someone else.

Many of us see ourselves as one or two talent persons. These are needed to carry on the work. There is little value in comparing ourselves with the five talent persons, lamenting that we cannot do what some others seem to be able to do. Rather than spending time and energy comparing our talents and abilities with others and allowing this to dictate our moods, would it not be far more profitable to say with humility and yet with confidence that God has created me in His own image. God has given me certain gifts and talents, and I want to use these gifts, and develop them to my highest potential, so that I can live a productive life for the glory of God.

I think that the central theme of this parable is that of faithfulness—being faithful with the gifts, talents, financial resources and Christian faith that God has so graciously entrusted to us.

There is yet another kind of gift that I would like to speak about this evening. It is the heritage of our Anabaptist Mennonite faith. This gift is founded on Jesus Christ.

Menno Simons, a leader of this movement had a motto which is found in I Corinthians 3:11: “Other foundation can no one lay, than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

This heritage had its roots in the 1500’s. In January of 1525, a group of men gathered in a room in Zurich, Switzerland, where they met regularly for Bible study and prayer. Conrad Grebel, Georg Blaurock, and Felix Manz were among them. On that special day, they felt the Holy Spirit leading them to begin practicing adult believer’s baptism and in that meeting they baptized each other.

It was not an easy decision, because the Zurich Council dictated infant baptism and condemned adult believer’s baptism. This was a costly decision because two years later Felix Manz was arrested for being a part of this new group, called the Anabaptists.

They asked him to recant and give up this teaching of believer’s baptism, but he didn’t.

They tied his hands to his knees, took him out in a boat in the Limmat River, and dumped him overboard. He was one of the early martyrs.

Joan & I attended the Mennonite World Conference in Amsterdam in 1967, and afterward we toured through parts of Europe, including Switzerland. There in the shadow of the huge Reformed Church, we walked along the bank of the Limmat River where Felix Manz gave his life for his convictions. Some of you undoubtedly have been to this Zurich site.

Tears came to my eyes as we remembered how many of our Anabaptist people suffered and died for the heritage to which we are heirs. This heritage not only stressed the importance of believer's baptism but also committed itself to follow the words of Jesus found in Matthew 5 and Luke 6—"But I say to you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good; and blessed are the peacemakers..."

As we stood there beside that river, I was convinced that I would always remain faithful to this heritage. I would never be embarrassed to be an Anabaptist Mennonite Christian. I know that this legacy is also treasured by all of you who are here this evening.

A very interesting thing is beginning to take place in our time. I'm wondering if a new wave of Anabaptism is emerging in our time, especially in our country. Several independent churches are in the process of exploring the possibility of becoming more closely related to the Anabaptist faith and its teachings. These are Christian churches which have searched the scriptures and found that they have somehow overlooked some of the teachings of Jesus on peace and justice. In their study of the Sermon on the Mount, they have been led to take a new look at Jesus' words about justice, poverty, and loving your enemies.

Some of these evangelical independent churches are beginning to see the value of belonging to a larger organized group, and for this reason are exploring the possibility of becoming a part of a denomination, possibly Mennonite Church USA.

One of these churches is located in Des Moines, Iowa. Their pastor is Gregg Mason.

They have been an independent church for 12 years, and now have joined the Central Plains Conf., which earlier was the Northern District Conference, so they are now a part of Mennonite Church USA. Another such group has recently joined the Mennonite Brethren Conference.

It is interesting to me, that while some of our Mennonite people are moving away from the teachings of our denomination and some churches have removed the word Mennonite from their name, there are other church groups who hear about our theology and are being led to this heritage which has been so meaningful to us.

Probably the most interesting development is taking place in St. Paul, Minnesota. In July of 2006, The New York Times ran a lead article about the Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, whose pastor is Gregg Boyd.

This is an independent evangelical church which started fourteen years ago and had rapid growth, resulting in 5,000 persons in attendance.

During the last election four years ago, some people in the church were urging their pastor, Gregg Boyd, to become more politically involved by putting an American flag in the sanctuary, and by publishing a list of conservative candidates who were “safe” to vote for. Pastor Boyd felt uncomfortable with this because he believed in the separation of church & state. It was also at this time that Pastor Boyd was studying the teachings of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount—including loving enemies and being peacemakers.

He felt led to preach a series of sermons on peace and justice, and the separation of church & State. The result was that 1,000 members, over a period of several months, left the church, with 4,000 members remaining.

The New York Times story of a mega church beginning to preach on peace, justice, poverty and other issues caught the attention of some of the faculty at Hesston College in Kansas. They invited Pastor Boyd to Hesston College to give the lectures at their annual Pastoral Ministry Conference .

At Hesston, Boyd became more acquainted with our theology, Mennonite people, and the Bible teachers at Hesston College. He further realized that he was finding a denomination that held identical beliefs to the ones he was discovering.

On one of our visits to Minneapolis to visit our daughter Karen, we visited Woodland Hills Church and heard Pastor Boyd preach. We attended the second service. It was filled with people of all ages and nationalities, including African American, Hispanic, Asian. The joy in the worship service was contagious. There must have been over 1,500 people in the worship center, a building that earlier served as a store in a shopping area.

This last year, we learned that Gregg Boyd has been in conversation with some of our Mennonite Church leaders, considering whether the church might someday form a relationship to our denomination.

This past summer, Boyd was asked to speak to a Mennonite Leader’s meeting in Columbus, Ohio, the site of our next national conference. Let me quote a few of his words: “You Mennonites have a great treasure. God has given you a precious gift and God wants to give this gift to the world through you. My sisters and brothers, you have

what multitudes in the rising kingdom are longing for. You can provide a home to so many who are right now looking for one. If you hold fast to the faith you've been entrusted with, you may just find your fellowship exploding in the years to come."

I just learned that Gregg Boyd has been asked to speak at our youth conference next summer at Columbus.

Regardless of whether their church someday becomes a part of Mennonite Church USA or not, it is encouraging to me that there are other Christians who are looking for a church and a denomination that has a holistic understanding of the gospel, which binds together evangelism, missions, peace and justice.

This is not the time for us to become proud, nor to put our light under a bushel but we need to let the light shine.

This is not the time to bury our treasure in the ground as did the one talent servant.

Instead, this is the time to share the treasure and the heritage that God has so graciously given us.

This is the time, to invest our treasure and gifts as we share our message with a world that has been torn apart by war, a world that is seeking a Savior, Jesus Christ, a world that is in need of a holistic understanding of the Gospel which Jesus taught and lived.

Tony Compolo has spoken at many of our national conferences and I can still hear him say, "You Mennonites have a great theology and a strong biblical faith. You should share it more freely."

I commend all of you for treasuring the faith which has nourished our larger church for almost 500 years.

I believe the central theme of this parable is FAITHFULNESS.

Remain faithful to the treasure God has given us.

May the Lord bless you as you continue to give witness to the faith that we hold so dearly.

AMEN