

“GIFTED AND TALENTED”

*A Sermon Nov 13, 2011 by Pastor Kim Wilker
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“The Parable of the Talents”

Matthew 25:14-30

Thank you Jesus! It's about time you give us a parable that's straight forward and easy to understand. We get it, okay...the kingdom of God is like this: There's this boss who's leaving town for a while and leaves 3 servants in charge of the operation, and not only that, but the boss gives them each a boat load of resources! 5 talents to one, 2 to another and 1 talent to the last servant. When I went on-line and googled “a talent”, the modern day value of just one talent ranged from 80 grand all the way up to 6 million. We're talking very valuable, and an extremely generous boss. As the story goes, the first two workers, put the talents to use and see them start to grow. Both doubled what the boss had given them. Both recognized the value of the master's gift, risked using what they had been entrusted with; and multiplied the gift for use in the kingdom of God. It took a leap of faith, but they did it and were able to do great things and gave a superb accounting at the master's homecoming.

The third servant, for some reason wasn't able to take the risk, took the talent and buried it in the ground. Maybe this servant was protecting the master's resources, playing it safe. Sometimes we find ourselves in similar situations where we are given opportunity to use our money, time and talents. We see an opportunity, but are afraid we might screw up, or feel somebody else is better gifted to respond. Then there are times when we have a chance to really make a difference for somebody or the community, and we have the gifts to do it; but we're afraid to risk what God has given us.

Back to the story...the master (A.K.A. God) returns and says: Show me the money! Two servants have great reports and celebrate, while the other, well, you snooze, you lose and gnash teeth to boot. So the point of the parable seems to be the master entrusts each of us with talents, resources, and the master gives them to us to use, not to bury. Easy parable to grasp, right? Hold on a second. Consider another possible viewpoint of this parable. What if the master in the story is not God, after all the parable doesn't mention “God”. What if the master is a filthy wealthy tyrant of a landowner who cares little or nothing about the servants, sets unreasonably high production standards, and indeed gives the workers lots of talents, not to benefit them, but only to selfishly amass even a greater fortune? Sure the master praises the first 2 workers and severely punishes the third one. In the traditional interpretation of this parable, the first two servants are sheep (heroes) and the third one a goat (loser). However, if the master is the rich unjust landowner, the roles are reversed. The two servants who used their talents bought into an unjust economic system while the third one refused to do so and buried the talent in outright opposition to the injustice of it all. So, now we have two different ways of looking at this parable of the talents. End of sermon. Amen! Not quite. How about one more viewpoint?

I'm gonna go a long way around to get at this so naturally...listen up. My spouse, our teenage daughter, two folks from the church and the special ed high school teacher recently spent 3 days in Great Falls at a Youth Transition Conference for high school youth with disabilities and their support people. There were persons with learning disabilities, a person with quadriplegia, persons with autism, visually impaired, persons with downs syndrome, a person with tourette's syndrome, a person with a traumatic brain injury, at least 4 deaf youth; some disabilities are obvious, others are hidden and this conference was for all people with disabilities. Resource people from a variety of organizations were present including vocational rehabilitation, social security, Montana disability rights, independent living services, teachers, representatives from PLUK (Parents Lets Unite for Kids), to name just a few. Our keynote speakers (A.K.A. servants) were Michael Murray, a person with ADHD disability and program director for American Association for people with disabilities and the other keynote was a young African American poet and motivational national speaker from New Jersey, Lederick Horne who has a neurological disability. The 3rd servant in the parable of the talents was also at the conference...that being every person present with a disability, including me!

Let me tell you about my disability and my experience of being the 3rd servant in the parable. Got your ear now huh? I'm not sure any of you have heard this from me before, but being part of this conference convinced me it's about time.

I grew up back in Dubuque, Iowa with a loving mom and dad and one fun sister too. I was a quiet kid, always thin, kind of dorky to put it mildly. I stood out in grade school primarily because I had to wear big odd brown shoes with high showing insert arch supports. I wasn't teased much, most kids seemed kinder back in the 50s. But when Jr. High and high school came along, well, that all began to change. Grades were being kept and to put it kindly I wasn't the sharpest quill on the porcupine when it came to academics, nor band where I played last chair 3rd part coronet. I was not a candidate for the "gifted and talented" classes of any kind. By 9th grade I was 6'2" and 133 pounds and remained that way all through high school. And oh yeh, my name Kim and being a male I got teased in and out of school about having a girl's name, "hey Kimmie" (with profanity attached). Of course I'd been taught sticks and stones may break my bones but word will never hurt me...bull pucky! It hurt! But, it wasn't my name, body build, or poor grades that were a disability.

I suppose it was my mom who noticed first at home as I'd spend an inordinate time in the bathroom before and after meals; the water running 10-15 minutes..."Are your hands hurting Kim, they're awfully red"...and then my insistence that the music books be exactly in the right order on the piano, and I became aware my favorite number was 3, a religious thing about the trinity, and I'd count everything by threes, divide, multiply, adds, etc. to figure out a math situation or I'd have to touch things 3 times. Leaving the house I always had to double, triple, quad, check to see if I left the stove on, the window open, etc. These are just a few characteristics of what disability??? OCD – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

People with obsessive compulsive disorder have persistent, upsetting obsessions and use rituals a.k.a. compulsions to control the anxiety these obsessive thoughts produce and much of the time, the rituals end up controlling them. My worst ritual was related to walking. I could walk 3 steps forward and one back, or 7 forward and one back, never step on a crack in the sidewalk, and sometimes also had to bend down and touch the sidewalk behind me for a count of 3. So now, picture a high school kid walking down the street like this, all the while knowing in my mind this is not in any way, shape or form, normal, but I could not help it! And it wasn't just outside on the sidewalk, but also inside the school halls on occasion.

Hand washing, ritualistic touching and counting, repetitive checking, an insistence on order and symmetry, well...my experience as a person with this disability included being bullied! I was called names, left out, isolated, teased, taunted, laughed at. Many tears and fears, my parents didn't know what to do, nobody did, my grades got worse, I didn't want to go to school, so I got d minuses in sciences, Latin, shop, mechanical drawing, math...pity grades rather than f's to get me through high school. However, I had straight A's in German. Go figure! I graduated with less than a C average! And an even lower self esteem and zero self confidence.

I don't know how I got through high school, but by the grace of God. Somewhere in the 18 years of weekly church, Sunday school, confirmation, I knew in my heart that God loved me just as I was and even though my folks didn't know what to do, they and my sister loved and cared for me too. I knew I had talents, not certain of what they were though, but because of the way I saw myself, and the way many other treated me, I buried those gifts for years!

I am a person with a disability, which is often accompanied by being "dissed" – discounted, disconnected, disordered, disempowered, distressed, disliked, disenfranchised, disregarded, dis-misunderstood; dissed in various ways and by so many. *I wonder if the third servant in the parable of the talents was a person with a disability?* I trust you can see why it'd be easy to bury the talent.

As far as my OCD disability, it affects about 2.2 million American adults today. It is quite varied and symptoms may come and go, ease over time or get worse. For me, the symptoms are almost gone. Well, okay, I'll be honest, for some reason during the conference when my daughter (a person with autism) and I were walking down the hotel hallway and nobody else in sight, I ran my finger along the ridges of the corrugated wall paper for counts of 3 and then a break, but the musical pitch coming from the wall was enjoyable so I just kept running my finger along for a longer count. I've got a feeling, being in the presence of so many people with disabilities, I somehow was free enough just to be who I am.

Before the next session began, our first keynote speaker came up to me and said, "I'd like to have time to discuss theology and disability with you. *I believe disability is a gift of God.*" Keynote speaker Michael Murray happens to be a brother in Christ and we enjoyed sharing our theological thoughts about God, persons with a disability, and faith. Our conversation was truly a time of stories, our own and those of others with a disability. And of course God's story. Through our sharing I celebrated the gifts people with disabilities are, and bring into the home, work place, school, community, church. Yet, I admit still working on going deeper about disability as a gift of God. I believe all people are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Persons with a disability are created in the image of God. They are not a distortion of God's image or a lesser image than persons without a disability, but each one is an equal and complete image of God. People with a disability are not incomplete examples of so called "normal" humankind, but are complete persons before God. The biblical witness that every person is created in the image of God is also an invitation for all of us to discover that image in each other – to treat other people as though they are made in the image of God rather than anything less and to expect other people to reveal something to us about the nature of God.

I am a spouse, a parent, a brother, a grandpa, a person with a disability, the third servant in the parable of the talents, who uses those God given gifts as a Lutheran pastor for the sake of the Kingdom of God. I did indeed bury the talents given me by the master. And I give thanks to people who saw me in the image of God and told me so! My childhood church where I was taught the love of God in Jesus for all people. My high school German teacher who taught me "sehr gut" (very good). The college who gave me a chance and the sociology professor who encouraged me to keep on keeping on. My spouse who said "I believe God is calling you to be a pastor". The seminary professor who gave me my only B+ grade (the rest were all A's) and the saints in congregations I've served on this journey. Sometimes, people with a disability need to experience words and actions of encouragement and support to unearth their God given gifts. May you as servants of God celebrate your talents and help others see and celebrate their God giftedness too! *For all people are created in the image of God, gifted and talented! Amen.*

A Theological Not so Smooth Rap on Disability

Master digging in the dirt – Adam come outta hole,
A fine person for sho but there be mo, and Eve come ribbing
And dis was all in da beginnin'
Gifted and talented – all r created in image of God
When did u c me...how did u c me...where did u c me...
Did I bury my talent in a hole – no it's u don't c me as whole
None of us is whole – we each gifted w diff talents
U dis my ability but my disability a gift
Oh say can u c
It jus lonliness down here in the abyss
I created dis way u created dat way
We r in dis together
We the bawdy body of Christ
Gifted diversity
We need to c with new eyes
Help other bros and sis c their own giftedness
Celebrate, encourage, lift up
Oh yeh, when we c u in prison? – dat be when my gift in the hole 24/7
Dat not the way it 2 b in kingdom of heaven
And sure nuff not sposed 2 b on earth – thy kingdom come now
Oh when da master come – he gonna scan the land and what he 2 c
U, me, unearthen these treasured gifts, sharing, caring, wearin out with joy
Cuz we all gifted and talented – we may not overcome, but we overcome with joy
Cuz da master he promise to free us from staying buried in the hole,
It will be no more cuz when he come again we'll be made whole
U c the gift is u, da gift is me, all gathered beneath the tree
Now we all got talents, not to keep, dat be the fool
Use ur tool, no mo drool...the master rule
An enter in da joy of the Master 4 ur r the gifted and talented image of God!