

*Sermons at*  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

November 19, 2023 (Proper 28, Year A)  
Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus' parable today invites us to think about the ways we USE the God-given gifts and abilities that God has PROVIDED us. What do we DO with them?

There's a story from India that I'd like to share with you. (The Grain of Rice)

Once there was a good king who ruled wisely and ruled well. He was LOVED by all the people of his kingdom. One day the king called his four daughters together and told them that he was leaving on a long journey. He said, "I wish to learn about God. I will spend a long time in prayer. In my absence I will leave the four of you in charge."

"Oh, father," they cried, "don't leave us. We will NEVER be able to rule the kingdom WITHOUT you."

The king smiled. "You will do well in my absence. Now, before I leave, I wish to give each of you a gift. It is my prayer that this gift will help you learn the MEANING of RULE." The king placed a single grain of rice in each daughter's palm. Then he left.

The oldest daughter immediately went to her room. She tied a long golden thread around the grain of rice and placed it in a beautiful crystal box. Every day she picked up the box and looked at it.

The second daughter also went to her room, where she placed the grain of rice in a WOODEN box and put it in a secure spot, under her bed.

The third daughter, a very pragmatic young woman, looked at the grain of rice and thought, "This grain of rice is no different from any other grain of rice." She simply threw the grain of rice away.

The YOUNGEST daughter took the grain of rice to her room and wondered about the significance of the gift. She wondered for a week, then a month. When nearly a YEAR had passed, she understood the MEANING of the gift.

Months turned into years, and the four daughters ruled in the absence of their father. Then, one day, the king returned. His beard was full, and his eyes sparkled with illumination gained through years of prayer. The king greeted each of his daughters, and then asked to see the GIFTS he had left them.

The oldest daughter rushed to her room and brought the crystal box. "Father," she began, "I carefully tied a golden thread around the grain of rice and have KEPT it near my bed, where I have looked at it every day since you left."

Bowing to his daughter, the king accepted the box and said, "Thank you."

Next, the second daughter presented her father with the WOODEN box. "All these years I have kept the rice secure under my bed," she said. "Here it is."

Again the father bowed, accepted the box, and said, "Thank you."

The third daughter rushed to the kitchen, FOUND a grain of rice, ran back and said, "Father, here is A grain of rice."

Smiling, the king accepted the grain of rice, bowed, and said, "Thank you."

Finally, the youngest daughter stepped before her father and spoke. "I do not have the grain of rice that you gave me," she said.

"Whatever did you do with it?" The king inquired.

"Father, I thought about that grain of rice for nearly a year before I discovered the MEANING of the gift. I realized that the grain of rice was a SEED, so I planted it in the ground. Soon it grew, and FROM it I harvested other seeds. I then planted all of those seeds, and again I harvested the crop. Father, I have continued to do this. Come, look at the results."

The king followed his daughter to the window, where he looked out at an enormous crop of rice stretching as far as the eye could see. There was enough rice to feed their entire small nation.

Stepping before his daughter, the king took off his golden crown and placed it on her head. "You have learned the MEANING of RULE," he said softly.

From that day the youngest daughter ruled the kingdom. She ruled long, and she ruled wisely, and she ruled well.

The end.

It's very similar to the parable JESUS told, where the master says to the servant with 5 talents and the servant with 2 talents, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." We say those precious words at EVERY funeral here at First Lutheran. Our GREATEST HOPE is that one day, when we MEET our Lord face to face, he will speak these beautiful words to US: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Why are THESE servants praised, and the ONE is NOT? Jesus teaches us that, when it comes to our abilities, we're as DIFFERENT as different can be. God didn't MAKE us all the SAME. There are some people who have great intellectual capabilities, and some who don't. There are some who have the ability to project and articulate their thoughts, and there are some who can't. There are some who have physical prowess and attractive looks, and there are some who don't. And some of the people we celebrate as celebrities in this culture might have MANY talents, and some of the people we find on the internet, like the site The People of Walmart, might not.

But don't MISS the fact that, in this parable, EACH of the servants, ALL 3 of them, were given SOMETHING. NO ONE was given NOTHING. You may not be a five-talent person, but you DO HAVE SOME TALENT. We all do.

And you know something. I think that there are a whole lot MORE ONE and TWO talent people in this world than there are FIVE talent people. Oh, there are SOME people who seem to have it all, we can't deny that. But MOST of us are only ONE or TWO talent servants.

But Jesus doesn't tell us to COMPARE our gifts; he takes as a matter of FACT that we are SIMPLY GIFTED DIFFERENTLY, and moves on.

The parable isn't REALLY ABOUT the gifts THEMSELVES, but about HOW the servants USE them. According to JESUS, ALL of us have the opportunity and the RESPONSIBILITY to INVEST in our gifts, WHATEVER they may be, and put them to good use, to grow and develop INTO the people God DESIGNED us to be.

WHO we are MADE to be: THAT'S up to GOD. How we USE what God has designed: THAT'S up to US.

Don't think, for a SECOND, that YOUR gifts AREN'T IMPORTANT. Sir Michael Costa, the celebrated conductor, was holding a rehearsal. As the chorus rang out, accompanied by scores of instruments, the piccolo player—a little pint-sized flute—thinking that his contribution wouldn't be missed amid so much music, stopped playing. Suddenly, the great leader stopped and cried out, "WHERE'S THE PICCOLO?"

The sound of that one small instrument was necessary to the full symphony, and the master conductor MISSED it when it dropped out. To the CONDUCTOR, there are NO INSIGNIFICANT instruments in an orchestra. Sometimes the smallest, and seemingly LEAST important, individual can make the GREATEST CONTRIBUTION, and, even if it doesn't seem to make that big a difference to the audience, the CONDUCTOR KNOWS it right away!

In the Church, the players and the instruments are diverse—different sizes, different shapes, different notes—different roles to play. But like the piccolo player in Sir Michael's orchestra, we often decide that OUR CONTRIBUTION ISN'T SIGNIFICANT. Our small part couldn't POSSIBLY make a difference. And so, we quit playing, stop doing the task that we've been given to do. We drop out. We BURY it, like the servant. We hide it like the one daughter in the story, or we throw it away like the

other daughter. But the CONDUCTOR NOTICES. From our perspective, our contribution may be small, but from HIS, it's CRUCIAL.

So, for all the piccolos who WON'T play, or at least aren't playing right NOW, Jesus tells this parable. The master entrusts the slave with something precious and expects that it will be used well.

We might say, "Aren't you getting a little carried away, pastor? HOW valuable can just ONE talent BE? After all, it's just ONE." Well, in terms of MONEY -- which was what a talent originally referred to, before Jesus made it mean more -- in terms of MONEY, a talent was roughly equivalent to nearly 20 YEARS WAGES for an average worker. If we do the math in modern terms, taking, say, \$50,000 as an average yearly income, a talent comes to around 1 million dollars. And that was the SMALLEST gift. To the servant with just ONE talent, the Master was UNBELIEVABLY GENEROUS.

OUR talents are JUST as precious to God. And every time we use them, a voice from the heavens calls, "Well done, good and faithful servants!" Whenever we use our TIME with our FAMILIES, instead of on the COUNTLESS ways this world calls us to WASTE our time; whenever we use our ABILITIES to SERVE another in the community, or at church; whenever we GIVE our MONEY to help others; whenever we share the Gospel with someone who needs to hear it; WHATEVER our talent may be, HOWEVER we use it, our master smiles on us, and says, "Well done, good and faithful servants!"

If nothing were at STAKE in this parable, the master wouldn't have CARED. But, something GREAT IS at stake. The Master has given EVERY one of us some piece of the KINGDOM, to be, and to do, and to give. The Master RELIES on his servants, and even a SINGLE TALENT, EVERY SINGLE ONE, is crucial. EACH of us is ENTRUSTED with a PRICELESS GIFT, and EACH of us is NEEDED.

A good and faithful servant KNOWS that even ONE talent, even a SINGLE GRAIN of rice, is PRECIOUS — when it's USED.

All of you have talents to share. And YOU make a DIFFERENCE. Your gift is NEEDED. It's CRUCIAL — to your family, and to your community, and to your church, AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY, to God.

Don't bury your gift in the sand. Amen.