

The Talent Show  
Matthew 25:14-30  
August 8, 2010  
Lin Grace Rohr

The title of this sermon is The Talent Show; but we're going to start with a trivia question. The question: In its fifth season, what is the British owned American reality television series on NBC that features singers, dancers, magicians, comedians and other performers of all ages competing for the advertised top prize of US\$1 million? Yes, America's Got Talent. Now, I'm not much of a TV watcher and I have never seen the show, even so, I know about it. Shows like this are popular in our society, where dreams of fame and fortune drive entertainment. That said I must give credit to Wikipedia for the content of the trivia question. Although I find it a bit humorous, I can resist making too much of a comment on why the British own a show on America's talent, but I can't resist doing "a play" on the word "talent" in the show and from our parable for today.

By definition, a parable is "a short, fictitious story that illustrates a moral attitude or a religious principle."<sup>1</sup> Unlike many of the contestants on America's Got Talent, who disappear after their fifteen minutes of fame, the parable of the talents has continued to be in the spotlight of stewardship for a couple of thousand years. As seen in the show, a talent is an ability. As seen in the parable, a talent is a unit of money. Here we have the two definitions of a talent; perhaps the parable mysteriously combines those definitions and is "a talent show" of sorts as well. In it we hear how a man leaves different amounts of money with three of his servants. Then the parable "shows" us how the talents are used, or not, with the religious principle of sharing our gifts the main message, summarized in verse 29, "for those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away," a positive affirmation on the one hand; a word of caution on the other.

By God's grace, as a community of faith, we have been embracing the positive affirmation...in the ways of blessing applause. This summer, we have been having our own weekly "talent show." In our summer sermon series, on Celebrating Blessings; Sharing Stewardship we have been putting the spotlight on different aspects of our ministry and mission. In our own way, showing how we've invested our "five talents" in mission and seeing them more than double in our mission fair's twenty displays of outreach. We showed how we've invested our "two talents" in our youth and children's ministry and have seen those talents multiply exponentially! The blessings of children's voices fill this place from our annual children's musicals to weekly children's time. The two teenagers last week sharing on behalf of dozens, their powerful stories of how their lives have been changed by service and fellowship on the youth summer trips. In each of those "showings" and all the others, we celebrated God's blessings upon us through the witness of those touched by a particular ministry/mission area. As we applaud God's blessings with our praise and service, we acknowledge that all these blessings come from God and that we indeed are the stewards. Trusted by God to invest our talents to God's glory, including building up the community of faith and serving others, we hear the words "well done, good and faithful servants." As faithful servants, we know there is more than just celebrating the blessings, we also share the stewardship!

Each and every ministry and mission happens because of your generous and faithful stewardship. Yet, many hear that word, stewardship, and want to cringe! We don't like to hear about money, especially our money, in a sermon. But as faithful stewards sharing stewardship is

essential. No, I am not rushing the summer to get to the fall annual campaign; I'm following through on the Session's commitment to have an intentional year round approach to stewardship. According to the Book of Order, Part II of our Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, among the session's responsibilities is "to challenge the people of God with the privilege of responsible Christian stewardship of money and time and talents." [G-10.0102h]; and it is a challenge for all of us.

Like a "talent show" competition we find ourselves competing on two stages so to speak: one stage, with the secular world for stewardship of people's time, talent and treasure. The second stage, we find ourselves overtly or covertly competing with other churches trying to copy their talents instead of sharing our unique ministry and mission. Surrounding the first stage, we have spectators and participants alike; analyzing the situation, the advantages and performances of what will my money do on this stage?

In his book, Not Your Parents' Offering Plate, Clif Christopher gives some startling statistics. In America, in 2008, there were over 1.8 million non-profit organizations, all competing for donor dollars...and in the recent recession that competition has become even more intense. According to Giving USA 2007, giving to religion amounted to just about 33% of all charitable contributions; beating education which got about 14%. On the surface this looks like very good news for churches, but there is a problem; our piece of the pie is shrinking at an alarming rate. In 1985, religion received 53% of all charitable giving. Through the 1990's religion received around 40-45%."<sup>1</sup> Add to the mix, the complications and complexities of the recent recession, including losses in the market, unemployment, furlough days, job sharing, people have less discretionary funds and so they are choosier where those funds are placed, if at all. Giving USA reported in June 2010, that the estimated overall charitable giving in 2009 declined by 3.2 percent after adjusting for inflation.

Lyle Schaller addresses this issue in his book The New Context for Ministry. Schaller says, "This new face of American philanthropy is distinguished by an unprecedented level of competition for the charitable dollar. For well over 90% of all Christian congregations...this means they will not compete..." Competing makes some of us uncomfortable, we get stage fright and the fear has a paralyzing affect on us...but not competing as the statistics show can have some pretty negative consequences.

When we consider why people give to the church, it's not primarily for a tax write off, it's not primarily out of guilt; people give to and through the church as a faithful response to our calling. In the worship section of our Book of Order, we have this excellent summary on Christian Giving. "Giving has always been a mark of Christian commitment and discipleship. The ways in which a believer uses God's gifts or material goods, personal abilities, and time should reflect a faithful response to God's self-giving in Jesus Christ and Christ's call to minister to, and share with, others in the world." [W.5.5004] Our theology of giving is in response to all God has given us and as a community of faith we respond individually to the church and collectively through the church. It's more than our wanting to hear God's affirmation of "well done good and faithful servant;" it's more than God loves a cheerful giver as Paul told us; it's because doing nothing is not an option! As faithful stewards, we can't bury our talents, by whatever definition we use!

We can't bury our treasure! Whether in the sacred or the secular world, we all want to make a difference. We want our time, talents and treasures to have an impact; we want what we do to matter! No one gets excited about contributing to a budget, but we do get excited when we

hear the stories of how our ministry and mission are making a difference! We want to be a part of making that difference! We want to contribute to the lives of our youth, children, visitors, mission outreach, new members, charter members and all the rest of us. Covenant is a bit shy about how deep and wide our ministry and mission go, we tend to want to keep it a secret but Scripture tells us to not keep our light under a lamp stand but to let it shine for all to see...not for our recognition, but for the glory of God! When we share our mission and ministry, it encourages us, and invites others to participate with us, in what God is doing, and to share in stewardship.

God said through the prophet Isaiah, “I am about to do a new thing, do you not perceive it?” We do perceive that God is doing a new thing! We are in an incredibly exciting time in our life together, this time of discernment, to begin in full next month. We are being given a gift! Not many congregations take advantage of this kind of opportunity! We are being giving a gift to discern together what our mission and ministry are now and for the future! Who is God calling us to be and how is God calling us to serve, to make a difference in this congregation, in Madison’s west side and far beyond these walls and county lines.

This brings us to the second stage of the Talent Show. This stage is the one where we find ourselves overtly or covertly competing with other churches trying to copy their talents instead of sharing our unique ministry and mission. It would be like a singer trying to compete as a juggler or a juggler as a ballet dancer; they could attempt the others’ talent, but with less than the best results. We don’t have to compete with other churches; God is working in and through us all, for the Kingdom of God on earth. It’s hard not to compete, we see God blessing others and we think that is what God is blessing. I’ve heard people ask why Covenant can’t be more like Blackhawk and I’ve heard people ask why Covenant can’t be more like the Unitarian Society. The fact that we have people worshiping with us asking both of these questions tells us something...tells us why! We don’t have to be another Blackhawk type church nor do we have to be another Unitarian type church, we don’t even have to have a day of free food at Sonic! What we do have to do is to discern who God is calling **us** to be, and how God is calling **us** to serve with our own unique ministry and mission!

I have my hopes and dreams for Covenant. You have yours as well. Not dreams of fame and fortune but dreams of faith and service. I am excited about our growing together in faith. I am passionate about serving God with you. We have been given the talents to do great things as we have been sharing in our ongoing Talent Show this summer. Great things, to make a difference, and in the discernment process we will faithfully figure out how to invest those talents and new ones to yet be discovered; to double or quadruple in blessedness according to God’s will. I believe we are on the threshold of something amazing that only God knows. Together we will share them, but most importantly, together we will prayerfully seek God’s vision for us. Confident that what God said through the prophet Jeremiah is for us as well, “Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” Our future with hope will continue to unfold, as good and faithful stewards we proclaim in our ministry and mission that “Covenant’s Got Talent,” many talents, many blessings from God that we are investing in our community of faith and in the world making a difference for the glory of God!

1. Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition
2. Christopher, Clif J. Not Your Parents’ Offering Plate, A New Vision for Financial Stewardship Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2008, p. 3
3. Schaller, Lyle The New Context for Ministry, Abingdon Press, Nashville p. 161