Twenty-Fourth Weekend After Pentecost: "You Are Talent-ed!"
Matthew 25:14-30
November 7-8, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

- What's a talent?
    - **Back in Jesus' day**, it was the largest unit of money, approximately 20 years' worth of wages for a day laborer. So the slave who received 5 talents had the equivalent of 100 years of paychecks!
    - **Today**, a talent is a God-given gift, a natural ability.

- Being able to name our talents, our God-given abilities, is a gift in itself, a personal **strength**. Claiming and naming our gifts doesn't show a lack of humility; it shows we know ourselves well, see ourselves clearly, and are deeply grateful to God.

- So what's a talent **you** have?

- **O**r a talent you recognize in the person sitting next to you or in anyone else seated in this sanctuary?

- The fact that the slaves in this parable are given such **huge** amounts of money is a tip-off that **any** talent God gives is priceless and precious. God doesn't judge people by the **number** of talents they have but by the **faithfulness** with which they develop those talents, and the **generosity** with which they share the **fruits** of their talents with the community and the world Are we using the talents we've been given so that God's will **is** done on earth as it is in heaven, and so that God's Kingdom **does** come? "For heaven's sake," are we **using** our God-given talents? Or are we burying them?

- A talent is raw material God gives us. I think we'd all agree that Deacon Ned has the gift of music, a beautiful talent that blesses our worship life and our community. But he wasn't born knowing how to play the organ! Most talents require us to cultivate them. **God's** part is **giving** the talent; **our** part is **developing** it and **doing** something with it.

The third slave in the parable literally buries his talent. He is **afraid**. Sometimes we bury our own talents because we are afraid. What might we be afraid of?

- Failure?
- Ridicule?
- Drawing unwanted attention to ourselves?

No reason is good enough to bury a God-given talent. Each one is **precious**. Each one is **priceless**. Each one is **needed** to make the community and the world complete. Even and maybe even especially in difficult circumstances we are called to share our talents and use our gifts.

In my time away these last couple weeks I learned about many things related to Luther and the Reformation, but also WW II history, the post-war creation of East and West Germany, and the fall of the Wall and the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990. There was lots of horror but also lots of heroism and lots of folks who used their gifts in hellacious circumstances to help their neighbor, to ease suffering, and to bring about both peace **and** justice.

Some of us have read the historical novel *The Lilac Girls* by Martha Hall Kelly. It's about women imprisoned in Ravensbrück, the largest Nazi concentration camp for women, where much medical experimentation took place. An exhibit I visited laid out the many ways prisoners found to resist, to help each other, to document the harrowing conditions that led to the death of so many. Women used their God-given gifts in the direst of circumstances to help themselves and others **survive**. God worked through their sometimes simple, sometimes heroic actions, any of which could have cost them their lives. Some of them had a "talent" for resistance and courage to act despite their fear of further punishment:

- A woman named **Hanna Sturm** was part of a work crew ordered to nail shut the windows of the block in which Jewish prisoners lived. In defiance and solidarity she used short nails so that the Jewish women could secretly pry open the windows for ventilation and then close them again.
- **Krystyna Czyz-Wilgat** included secret messages (written in urine) between the lines of the letters she was allowed to send. Her writing described the medical experimentation done on inmates.

- **Joanna Szydlowska** and others secretly took photos to document the atrocities.
- **Various teachers** led history and philosophy classes and organized literary evenings to keep minds and souls alive.
- **Aat Breur** was an artist forced to paint greeting cards for the SS. But she also created little booklets to cheer up fellow prisoners, sketched portraits of women and children, and clandestinely drew scenes of camp life.
- **Elizaveta Skobcova** was a Russian Orthodox nun whose religious name was Mother Marija. She prayed with other prisoners and gave them soul-nourishing spiritual support. She served as "an oasis of tranquility and a beacon of hope."[1] Mother Marija is honored at Yad Vashem as one of the Righteous Among the Nations. She was canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church in 2004.
- **Elisabeth Krug** was assigned to a work detail in a storage cellar. For over a year she stole food for her fellow inmates. When the theft was discovered, she was sent to a punishment block within the camp. They offered her a transfer if she were willing to beat another prisoner. She refused and was killed.
- **Majda Mackovsek** was a surgeon assigned to treat fellow prisoners. She survived the war and in later years her home country of Slovenia granted her the medal of honor for her compassionate medical ministry in Ravensbrück.

All these women and so many more used their talents, to help themselves and others survive, to prevent and alleviate suffering, in the most challenging circumstances possible. They could have let their talents lay fallow, but they chose instead to harness their "superpowers" for good. Despite their fear they exhibited courage, which we are also called to do, day in and day out. The latest Louise Penny book (*Miss Wolcott's Ghost*) includes this quote about fear and courage: "What made a coward wasn't the degree of fear, it was the lack of courage." We could slightly reword that: "What makes a hero isn't the absence of fear, it's the presence of courage." And the presence of God's grace, I would add. I have a prayer card that says it well: "Courage is fear that has said its prayers."

Parables can be tough to decipher and understand. Let me just say the master in this parable of the talents is **not** like our God, other than being the One who gives the talents **and** the One who expects us to develop, use and share those talents! Most of the spotlight falls on the third slave, poor fellow, addressed as, *"You wicked and lazy slave!"*

(Matt. 25:26) Another translator interprets that as "You evil and **timid** slave!" "Timid" is not a happy adjective for a follower of Christ. **Service**, not security, should be our concern. We are to be **bold** in professing and sharing our faith, willing to take risks, willing to risk loss and court failure, willing to stand out from the crowd, willing to invest ourselves fully into identifying, developing and using our God-given gifts.

The third slave wasn't willing to risk **losing** any of what he'd been given, so he **buried** it. Our Lord is looking for a good return on the divine investment in the talents we have received. Like some financial statements say, "Investment risks loss." But investment can also lead to **great** returns, especially when it comes to the Kingdom of heaven.

In my study materials I found this "Prayer for Purpose" by Julie Rattey:

> What path would You have me take today, Lord?
> Where would You have me go?
> Whom would You have me be?
>
> Help me to listen for your voice, O Lord –
> in the places I go
> in the people I meet
> in the silence of my heart –
> to know my purpose on this journey with You.
>
> Like the good servant who used the talents he was given
> for his master's benefit,
> let me not bury my purpose in the ground
> but grant me the courage to bring it to the light,
> to use in the service of Your people.
>
> Remind me that You are with me, Lord,
> with every step I take,
> and that no purpose is greater
> than choosing the path You have set for me
> today, tomorrow, and always.

Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

[1] "Ravensbrück" exhibit, German Resistance Museum, Berlin, Germany.