

## *“A Twin Tension”*

**Text: Matthew 25:14-29; I Corinthians 12: 4-7**

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### **I**

Two clippings from the Bible form the heart of what I am thinking about today. Though each is separated from the other by a-hundred-and-thirty-four pages they both illuminate something of the same truth – which, as you will come to see, is about the very giftedness of life.

The first one can be found in the mailbox of Paul as he wrote to the nascent church in Corinth. He was affirming that each of them is somehow endowed by the spirit of God; that no one is left out of that promise; and also that no one is exempt from that responsibility. He said it with words that you’ve surely heard before: **“There are varieties of gifts, but the same God who inspires them in everyone; to each is given some manifestation of the spirit for the common good.”** Which, through mystery of spirit and time, is also to say that you and I, though admittedly different, are gifted by God and have something important to give back to the world.

The second emerges in a parable of Jesus. It’s a story all about some talents that are given – certain measure of the investable variety. Each of three people is given something by God but each in differing amounts. Of the three, the man with the least calculable value saw himself as having less and consequently was more afraid than he was inspired. And so he dug a hole and buried what he had. Flat out: he stashed it away – as in “nothing ventured, nothing lost.” When finally called to account for what had become of his gift, his response echoed something like this, **“Master, I was afraid to use what you gave me, and so I buried it.”**

And so these two clippings now side by side, held in contrast: this is where we begin today and the living tension that they present. **“To each is given something for the common good . . . ah, but Master . . . I was afraid to use what you gave me!”**

### **II**

Let’s take it a step deeper. I suspect that the man in the parable might have been afraid because he didn’t really believe in his own giftedness. The world is, quite honestly, full of people who think that. Perceiving ourselves and our gifts accurately is not a linear process. It’s more subjective than that. And there are many who hold back on fully investing in life because they truly believe that they have little to offer, and the end result is that the world becomes poorer for their part and not richer. **“Ah, but master . . . I was afraid to use what you gave me!”**

History teaches us about this. Did you know that Mahatma Gandhi never perceived himself as having much to offer, and yet when he died the whole world mourned.<sup>1</sup> Albert Schweitzer felt inferior as a child believing himself to have very little to give, yet as he applied himself he affected the world in countless ways.<sup>2</sup> Norman Vincent Peale stuttered and was told he had poor verbal abilities, yet when he pushed beyond that imposed limitation he inspired generations.

Let me tell you a personal secret. Once upon another life I interviewed to be the Minister to Youth in Concord, Massachusetts. I wanted that job in every way - except I found out that it

required that I would preach a few times a year. No way! That was a deal-breaker. I did not perceive in myself the capacity to be a public speaker, let alone a preacher! But the man with whom I would come to revere as my mentor encouraged me: “Give yourself time to develop. There is more in you that you give yourself credit for.” Who-da-ever-thunk-it! I almost turned down that invitation because I didn’t want to preach!

Henri Nouwen, ever wise: “When we finally recognize that our gifts are really God’s gifts, small as they may seem, they become great. When we refrain from giving the little we have becomes less. When we live generously and with abundance, what we give becomes more.”<sup>3</sup>

### III

Let’s take it deeper yet. I suspect that the twin tension before us . . . **“to each is given something for the common good . . . ah, but master . . . I was afraid”** . . . gets stuck around an incorrect assumption about the calculus of life. It gets stuck around an inclination of the material world, that is, the belief that “to have is to hold . . . to let go is to loose.” And consequently what we have we hang on to . . . secretly, quietly, undetected . . . gifts and talents and dreams and money; and the fear of letting go keeps us from fully investing ourselves.

George Bernard Shaw: “This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.”<sup>4</sup>

As you are aware, Pam and I have been, are still in, the settling of a loved one. And going through Pam’s mom’s house and belongings these present days, a collection of almost 89 years, raises a curious thing for me to wonder about. One day I’ll be gone and someone will have to sort my life through. Is the stuff of my life so important, or is there something else? Is life material or spirit or both? Which matters more? Is the measure that I will leave behind one of relationship and abundance and generosity and giving, or will someone assess that things were just a little too important? Is my life cluttered because I fear letting go? Have I invested myself wisely? Am I a feverish clod of ailments and grievances or will someone apprise me as more?

These are haunting thoughts. But they are very real. And they are very present. And they should well demand the best of our wondering response.

### IV

And so this twin tension: I leave it with you this morning as I take it to heart myself. **“To each is given some gift for the common good . . . ah, but Master, I was afraid to use what you gave me!”**

It’s especially important for us to wonder about it as we, once again, offer and collect and ask for the communal giftedness of us all for the life of this congregation and the mission and ministries that we share. How much do we hold on? How much do we let go? How important are the things of life to us? How important are matters of spirit and heart and soul? How many of our gifts are fully given? How many are held for another day that never comes? Could the parable be about me? Might it be about you?

“Isn’t it strange that princes and kings,  
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings  
and common people like you and me  
are builders for eternity?

Each is given a bag of tools,  
a shapeless mass, a book of rules;  
and each must make, e’re life is flown,  
a stumbling block or a stepping stone!”<sup>5</sup>

May we learn to better risk for the realm of God, to reach for the fullness of life, to give of ourselves freely and lavishly, and to invest in the things that truly matter most. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Marian Wright Edelman. The Measure of our Success: A Letter to My Children. Beacon Books, 1992, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Kidd, in an unpublished sermon, “A Gifted Person”.

<sup>3</sup> Henry J. M. Nouwen. Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of His Final Year. Crossroad Books, 1996, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> William Green. A Stewardship Devotional. United Church Press, 2007 Congregational Vitality Initiative, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Eugene W. Brice. The Illusion of Excellence. CBP Press, 1990, p. 6.