September 24/25, 2016 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 25:14-30

Participating In our Ministries: Participating By Our Gifts

Consider all of the resources you have in your life- your finances and your skills, your spiritual gifts and your time, your relationships and your knowledge, your passions and your possessions.

Which resources do you use for the benefit of your family?

Which resources do you or have you utilized at work?

Which resources do you share for service in the community?

Which resources do you share for the glory of God?

This weekend we are midway through our sermon series on the vow of membership that asks: Will you faithfully participate in the ministries of the United Methodist Church by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness?

As I have said before, this is not only a question of membership, but is also a call to discipleship for all Christians. How are we taking part in God’s kingdom work in this world, lived out within the context of our local congregation, through our prayers and our presence? We have covered that question over the past two weeks.

How are we also taking part in God’s kingdom work in this world, lived out within the context of our local congregation, through sharing our gifts in service and witness? The final two weeks of our series will cover that question, yet how we answer then will hinge on how we respond today, to the call to participate by our gifts.

Oftentimes in the church, we refer to our gifts as only our finances. We will focus on that particular gift in November. Today I invite you to consider our gifts as all of the resources we have in our lives. They include our finances and our time, our skills and our spiritual gifts, our relationships and our knowledge, our passions and our possessions. Our gifts are what enable us to serve God in the church and in the world.

Yet before we can use our gifts to serve God, we first must surrender our gifts to God. And that is the challenge of this particular question. Do we really want to take part in the ministries of the church by our gifts? Do we really want to share our time in ministry, do we really want to find a place for our skills and gifts to be used in mission, do we really want to intentionally give our finances for the work of the church?

..When the Crusades were being fought during the 12th century, the crusaders employed mercenaries to fight on their behalf. Because it was a religious war, the crusaders insisted that the mercenaries be baptized before being sent into battle. Yet as the mercenaries were being baptized, they would do a strange thing—they would hold their swords out of the water while the rest of their bodies were submerged, so that God would not control their weapons. They wanted to keep control over their swords in order to use them in any way they wished.

Today many people handle their faith in a similar fashion, though they may not be as obvious about it. They want to follow God, but not in every area of life. They would be like a man who was about to be baptized, but first held up his wallet so it would not get wet. How many people hold their wallet or calendar or even their work ethic out of the water, so to speak, saying to God, “God, You can be the Lord of my entire life except for this area, except when it comes to money or when it comes to my schedule or when it comes to my attitude at work. That I am perfectly capable of handling myself.”

--Maurice Stargell 11-3-11 hope-church.tv/pastor-maurices-blog 11-3-11 adapted

God calls us all to be faithful stewards of all of God’s gifts entrusted to us. Traditionally, a steward is a manager or trustee accountable for the care, upkeep and responsibility of someone else’s property or possessions.

To be a steward of God is to believe that everything we have is a gift from God, and technically we don’t own or claim anything as our own. God is the owner and God is the provider. To be a steward of God is to believe that all of our resources have been entrusted to our care by God, to be managed for the purpose and glory of God.

So we each have a choice--

Will we see all of our resources as gifts of God, and be willing to manage everything according to God’s ways, or will we see all of our resources as the work of our hands, to be used solely for our pleasure? Will we manage well all that God has entrusted to us, or will we squander all of God’s good gifts? Will we focus more on worldly wealth or focus more on the love of God and the love of neighbor?

In our parable today, A master entrusted three of his servants with valuable amounts of the master’s property.

To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability.

Then the master went away.

A talent then was a unit of measurement, the equivalent of 6,000 denarii, and each denarii was equivalent to one day’s wage. So each talent was worth over 16 years of income! Five talents, then, would be the equivalent of more than an entire lifetime of wages!

Once the master had left on his journey, each servant had to decide how to manage that incredible amount that had been entrusted to them. The servant with five talents went off, traded them, and made five more talents. The servant with two talents also traded his talents, and made two more talents. The servant with one talent dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money, a perfectly acceptable way to hide one’s valuables in the time of Jesus.

When the master returned, the ones who had doubled their money were praised and given even more responsibility. Although making money with money was not seen as respectable in the time of Jesus, these two servants were praised for following in the way of their master. The servant with one talent, the one who had done the prudent thing, who kept the money safe instead of risking it in some questionable adventure, he was severely chastised and had his talent taken away.

Why such a difference?

Jesus reveals that the servant with one talent knew the ways of the master yet refused to follow his ways.

The servant with one talent was fearful to take a risk, even though he knew the master reaped where he did not sow and gathered where he did not scatter seed. The master had high standards and hated careless ways, as one Bible paraphrase likes to say, yet the servant with one talent was seen as careless and lazy because he did not invest up to the standard of his master. The servant with one talent refused to live up to the trust placed in him, seeing the money as a burden rather than a blessing, a challenge rather than an opportunity. This was why he was chastised. His issue was not the amount of money returned to the master; his issue was a violation of the trust placed in him to manage the money well.

Is that not what God does with us every single day?

No matter our status in society God entrusts his resources to us. Rich or poor, a professor or a plumber, God entrusts his resources to each and every one of us. God also entrusts us with the good news of Jesus, the good news of forgiveness, love, grace and hope for all humanity.

We then have a choice to be responsible or careless with the gifts given to us by God. Will we multiply them to God’s glory, or will we tuck them away for a rainy day, never using them out of fear of ridicule or failure?

The master’s response to the one talent servant seems harsh to our ears, sounding even contrary to a God of grace who loves us all, but even these harsh words have a place in our faith as they remind us, as they reminded the first disciples, that there is no place in God’s kingdom for a “safe” response to a life of following Christ.

Like coming to faith in Jesus, following Jesus is a choice. We either live for God or we don’t. We either obey his Word or we don’t. We either share his gifts with others or we don’t. We either respond to God’s gifts of grace and love or we don’t. While we are not saved by what we do, we are called to respond to the grace that saves us. And rarely is that response “safe.”

..Fred Craddock once said, “The major themes of the Christian faith —caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping—[they] cannot be understood or lived without risk.”

--Craddock, p. 515

If we try to live our faith journey without risk, then we are like the servant who simply buries his talent.

And when we bury our talent and not allow God to work through us to save others, then God will then move on to someone else and work through them, in essence giving our talent away as we have been found unfaithful and not trustworthy with the message of Christ and his ministry to the world!

God yearns for us to be his people in this world. God yearns for us to use our resources for his kingdom ways of justice and love, of forgiveness and hope.

In order to be the hands and feet of Christ in this world, God entrusts every one of us with resources. Yes, some will have more than others. What we have is not a competition. While you may have more financial resources, the person sitting in front of you may have more time to give. While you may have the gift of hospitality, someone else may have the skill of woodworking.

Remember that in the parable even one talent was still an incredible amount of money, the equivalent of 15 years of wages. So no matter how much or how little we are each entrusted with, we are all still called to be faithful stewards of whatever resources have been entrusted to us.

Pastor Samuel Lloyd has said that ..the whole biblical vision is based on the infinite value of small things—of the widow's small gift to God that nevertheless was all that she had; of the one lost sheep the shepherds leaves the rest to find. No gift is too small to be revered and used in the economy of creation. The smallest gestures—a letter written, a prayer offered, a child tutored, a check written, help given a colleague—they make the world flow with more grace, hope and love.

--Samuel Lloyd csec.org 3-5-00 Are You Ambitious Enough? adapted

..Sir Michael Costa, the celebrated orchestra conductor, was once holding a rehearsal. As the mighty chorus rang out, accompanied by scores of instruments, the piccolo player stopped playing, thinking perhaps that his contribution would not be missed amid so much music. Suddenly, the great leader stopped and cried out, "Where is the piccolo?"

The sound of that one small instrument was necessary to the harmony, and the Master Conductor missed it when it dropped out. The point? To the Conductor there are no insignificant instruments in an orchestra.

Sometimes the smallest and seemingly least important one can make the greatest contribution and even if it does not seem to make that big a difference to the audience at large, 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 sometimes decide that our contribution is not significant, that what we do or fail to do could not possibly make a difference. And so we quit playing.

..Or we give what another pastor calls the third servant excuses: "Joe’s got way more ability than I do." “I’m not qualified.” "My grandmother did more than enough for our family." "I’ve done my share." "Let someone else do it." When we belittle our value, we then tend to drop out. But the conductor immediately notices.

From our perspective, our contribution may be small, but from his, none are small at all.

--David Leininger “Don’t Lose It! Lose It!” leiningers.com 11-16-08

From Richard Love, Sermon, "Blowing Your Horn," eSermons.com, adapted

--excuses from John Jewell “Be Fruitful” lectionarysermons.com 11-14-99

One of the blessings of our United Methodist connection is that together, our small contributions add up for great things. Together we have bought a new plane for Wings of the Morning. Together we moved the death rate of malaria in Africa to one death every 2 minutes. Together we are the body of Christ active in this world.

So as you consider the ways you take part in the church by your gifts…

How are you investing your finances for the work of God in this world?

Are you an intentional giver or a loose change giver? Do you give out of a sense of duty or out of a grateful heart?

..Several years ago a young mother with two children walked into an inner city church just as the service was ending. As she sat down to talk with the pastor following the service, listen to how the pastor describes this unforgettable encounter:

.."The woman had walked over to church from the battered women's shelter, and was quite distressed to find that she had missed the worship service. She was going to be getting on a bus the following morning and heading to a new life in a city 1,000 miles away. The shelter had made arrangements for her to stay in a shelter in the new city while she searched for a job and housing and got herself on her feet. She had come to the church because she wanted to pay her tithe and have the pastor pray for her before she set out to build a new life for her sons.

"She talked about how difficult it would be, moving to this new city, and how she was going to have to trust God if she was going to make it. She had no church home, and knew that was something she was going to have

to change when she reached this new city. It was the first of the month, and she had just received her welfare check. She very carefully counted out exactly 10% of it and handed it to me. I wanted to refuse her money. As much as the church struggled financially, she and her two young sons needed it more.

I opened my mouth to tell her to keep her money, but something stopped me. I realized that the money (about $33) would not make the difference between her making it in the new town and not making it, but that her giving it, and thus putting God first and living out her trust in God, might very well make the difference. So, I took the money. I delivered it to the counters in the office, and found her a Bible. I wrote down some passages she might find helpful in the front of the Bible. I had a prayer with her. I sent her out the door and on her way to a new life.

"I have no idea what became of that woman, and don't even remember her name. I do remember her determination that if she was going to make a success of her new life, she had to put God first and live out her trust in God.”

--Adapted from Wendy Pratt, via Ecunet, 11-3-97

told by David Leininger leiningers.com 11-12-00 “The View from Jesus’ Pew”

How are you investing your **skills** for the work of God in this world?

Shelly Houser is using her love of children and her love of music to start a children’s choir this weekend.

If you are skilled at using your hands, have you made or fixed something for another in need, a meal or an auto repair or even a warm blanket?

..Because Antonio’s voice was high and squeaky, he did not make the tryouts for the Cremona Boy’s Choir.

When he took violin lessons, the neighbors persuaded his parents to make him stop. Yet Antonio still wanted to make music.

His friends gave him a hard time because his only talent was whittling. When Antonio was older he served as an apprentice to a violinmaker. His knack for whittling grew into a skill of carving and his hobby became his craft. He worked patiently and faithfully. By the time he died, he left over 1,500 violins, each one bearing a label that read, “Antonio Stradivarius.” They are the most sought-after violins in the world and sell for more than $100,000 each. Antonio couldn’t sing or play or preach or teach but his responsibility was to use his ability, and his violins are still making beautiful music today.

-- Brian Bill “Using What God Has Given You” 5-02 sermoncentral.com

How are you investing your **time** for the work of God in this world?

Do you build into your calendar time for worship or Wonderful Wednesday or youth group?

Do you clear in your calendar time to serve at church or in the community when a need arises?

Do you set aside time each day or each week to spend in prayer and study of God’s Word?

.. “When Pastor Don Goodly was called to the East Crossroads Village church, he inherited the Widow Hope.

She was not listed as an employee or as a deacon or committee person, yet she was always around the church.

Since her husband’s death and her move to the village, Widow Hope had begun occupying her time by helping the part-time janitor do the dusting and cleaning that he never accomplished. Then the part-time secretary began to find work for the Widow. Of course, she was always ready to lend a hand in the church kitchen. Thus her duties grew until it seemed that she practically lived in the church building.

One day Pastor Goodly became curious over a little song she was singing. As he drew closer, he recognized the words from Acts- Gold and silver, have I none, but such as I have, I give to thee.”

When Widow Hope was taken seriously ill, many people felt sorry for themselves because this little task was not done or that little chore was neglected. Gradually, as people were assigned tasks which seemed to get automatically done in the past, an appreciation grew for the work Widow Hope had been doing. Truly she had given from what she had; her cheerfulness, her willingness and her time. Both Pastor Goodly and his congregation realized how great was Widow Hope’s gift.”

--Stewardship publication, 9/2000

How are you investing your **whole self** for the work of God in this world?

How are you offering God all of your gifts, so that when the time to serve comes, you are ready, and when the time to give comes, you are ready, and when the time to lead comes, you are ready?

I heard a story about a little boy who went into a church one Sunday morning to get out of the cold. He had been trying to sell newspapers, but not a single customer had passed by. He entered the church, hoping to pass an hour unnoticed on the back row. The preacher delivered a powerful sermon about Jesus and his love for us.

At the end of the service, they took an offering.

The ushers went from row to row until, finally, one came near to the little newspaper boy. He stopped right in front of the little boy and held out the offering plate. The boy stared at the offering plate, and after a long pause,

he asked the usher to place the offering plate on the floor. Then the little boy did something very unusual.

He stepped into the offering plate -- first one foot and then the other. He slowly looked up with tears streaming down his cheeks and said, “Mister, I don’t have any money; I haven’t sold a single newspaper today, but if Jesus did all that preacher said he did just for me, I will gladly give my life to Him.”

I don't know if that story is true, but I do know that God wants us to give him our all – our hands, our feet, our hearts, our voices, our silver and our gold. --homileticsonline.com

We are all called to be faithful to the word of God from 1 Peter that proclaims:

“Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God,

serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received…

so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.” (4:10, 11)

We are still called to surrender our gifts to God. In what area of your life is God calling you to risk letting go today?

Whether we have received much or little in the way of resources, we are still called to use our gifts to God’s glory. How are you honoring God through your gifts this week?

We have been blessed with many resources—our time and our skills, our finances and our faith stories, our relationships and our passions. May we share our gifts in faithful, intentional ways so that the work of Christ continues in the world around us.

May it be so.

Let us pray.