

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

16th June 2013

Exodus 18: 13-27

Ephesians 4:7,11-16

"You will wear yourself out" said Jethro to Moses. You will wear yourself out. Last week, as we are looking at the stewardship of our talents, I suggested to you that the only way to measure how much of your talents, your abilities, your skills you are giving to the service of God's kingdom is by how much you have left, how much you are not giving, how much of what you do is not related to your service to God. I know that some of you - maybe those who were listening most closely - found it challenging. It may be that you were thinking that it all sounded really exhausting. It may well be that some of you think I need a Jethro in my life to tell me that if I go on thinking and acting that way I will wear myself out. You could be right, though I do have one or two friends who are not afraid to act in this way.

You will wear yourself out. But stewardship, of talent, time or money is all about not doing that! Not wearing out. To give all one's time to some act of charity or mercy, so that one's own family, for instance, is neglected, is not good stewardship, though it can make us feel good about how committed we are. To give all one's money to charity and then have to depend on the charity of others is also not good stewardship, though it might be easier than having to work out just what is the best use of every pound you possess. And to use your talents and skills, great though they may be, in such a way that others are disempowered, or become dependant on you, is not stewardship either.

A steward, in the original meaning of the word, was someone who looked after and managed a property, an estate, even a county or a country on behalf of someone else. A steward reigned in the name of a king who was too young or too old and enfeebled to do it for himself. A steward looked after his master's estate, with full powers to make decisions, when the master was away, perhaps away for years at a time. The steward had the responsibility of the role he took on, but he also, to a large extent, enjoyed its privileges.

So stewardship is about good use of things, use of things on someone else's behalf, in our case, on behalf of God and of his kingdom. Paul, writing to many of his churches, and today we read what he said to the church at Ephesus, often made the point that God gives us gifts and talents so that we can use them to build up his kingdom, so that we can help each other in our faith and so that we can reach out to the world with the good news about Jesus.

The point, when we use the word "stewardship", is that what we are using is not our own, it belongs to someone else. When we talk of the stewardship of our talents, of our gifts, then we are saying that

these things, attributes which are very much a part of who we are, are not actually ours at all. They belong to God. They belong to him but are given to us - for a purpose.

In my last parish one of the churches had three pianos in it. We did not use three pianos, at the very most we used two, one in the vestry for choir practice and one in the church for occasional use when we could persuade Alan to abandon the organ. The third piano was very old and dented and could no longer be tuned. At a Session meeting I suggested that we get rid of it, as it was just cluttering the place up. At once one of the elders spoke up "You can't get rid of that piano," she said, "It's gifted!" Gifted was what it was not. It had been given to the church (and was then the church's to do what it liked with: bear that in mind if you ever think you want to give the church something - we don't have to keep it in perpetuity!). Things are given, but people are gifted.

People are gifted, God gives us gifts to be used for his purposes. And his purposes are best served when not just one person does everything. I remind you again, as I have before, that the reason I even considered coming to this church was because in your advertisement for a new minister you described yourself as a team seeking a leader. A team, a group of people who work together.

A church, a healthy, functioning church, should not be a one-man or woman band. All of us have things to contribute - in worship and in service.

In many organisations, and many, many churches, there is what is known as the 80/20 rule. This is not a rule, as in something which ought to happen, an idea to aspire to. It is a rule in that too often it is what comes about. The 80/20 rule says that 20% of the people do 80% of the work. It is a rule in the church as a whole, and can often be a rule in smaller groups within the church - the Session, for instance. But it is not God's rule. Not one of his commandments.

If we take the stewardship of our talents and gifts seriously, then the 80/20 rule should not apply. Likewise if we take the service of the kingdom of God seriously, and don't restrict our understanding of that to what happens within the church building on a Sunday morning (or at any other time), then we should understand that the 80/20 rule is far from the reality of things.

In talking about everyone having a gift from Christ, Paul tells the Ephesians that some are apostles, which is those who are sent by God.

Others are prophets, those who speak God's word, especially to society - and last week we reminded ourselves that some of us are uniquely placed to do that, in national or local contexts.

Some are evangelists. This doesn't have to mean people who organise great big meetings which end with an altar call. It means those who take good news, who take it in their words, the good news of Jesus; who take good news in their lives, as they live the redeemed, healed, restored lives which Christ gives us.

Others still are pastors and teachers, those whose work is largely within the church, teaching and caring, shepherding and helping people grow.

All of us have been given gifts. Some are gifts which take us out into the world, to meet many different people, to move from place to place. Some of us have what you might call apostolic gifts. Such gifts might be of speaking, or singing, of writing or in creative arts. They take us into the world and where we go, the good news about Jesus goes too. If you have been given such a gift, then your task is to find how to use it so that your faith in God and in Christ is seen through it. That will differ for every single person - there is no blue-print.

Some of us have prophetic gifts: your talent is for seeing what is going on, for reading behind the headlines, whether they are headlines of news bulletins or papers, or of little, personal stories which someone tells us. Not all prophets work in the public arena: some are the good listeners, who by offering one small comment can change the way we look at our stories, and the way we respond to life.

Some of us are evangelists. The good news of God's love shines from the life of an evangelist, but mainly they don't know it themselves. Many evangelists would be most surprised to be so named. The evangelist can be talented in almost any way, creatively, domestically, artistically, practically; but all of them are good news people.

And some are pastors and teachers. Well, you say, that's you, the minister. I hope it is. I also hope that it is not just me. Our elders have a pastoral responsibility. Those who work with our children have a pastoral responsibility. Those who visit the housebound or the sick have a pastoral responsibility. When we appoint people to such roles we should be looking to make sure that they also have the right gifts and talents to fulfil them.

When I worked in Chicago, at one point I served as a locum minister in a Presbyterian church which was located in a part of the city which had changed. Not had once been a rich part of town, on the north lake shore. There were rich people there and a thriving church. But most of the rich residents had moved further north as new developments were built, and in their place African immigrants (who are different from Afro-Americans) moved in. In the church there was a remnant of people left from the earlier days of the community, and a lot of the new immigrants. But all the work of the church was done by the people of the former group. So I suggested to the Session that they might ask this one or that one of the Africans to do various tasks. However they always replied "But they never have, so how do we know that they would manage?" And of course, not asking, they would never find out. Even then I was not so immature that I didn't know that what was really going on. These were people who had seen their neighbourhood change, and were seeing their church change, and who wanted to cling to the familiar and to the little influence and power they still had. They were clinging to the old ways, but meanwhile the church was barely functioning, never mind doing outreach or ministry in its community. And gifted people were being frustrated in their desire to serve.

Jethro told Moses to be careful that he didn't wear himself out. Burnout in ministers is not unknown. But it should not be that way. We are called to the ministry of the whole people of God. This does not mean that every Christian is equally called to every form of ministry. This means that unless every Christian is playing his or her part, the ministry of Christ in the world will not be truly known.

Moses listened to his father-in-law. He didn't hold on to his exclusivity. He didn't say that he was the only one God had specifically called, so he was the only one who might do this work. Moses appointed helpers. He didn't wait to see who God would mark out, or who would come to him as volunteers. He recognised the wisdom spoken by Jethro and made the appointments. There are times that I wish I could do that. Times I wish I could say, you will do this and you will do that. But we don't have bishops in this church. Instead we rely on everyone being willing to help, to join in, to do what he or she can (not what he or she can't) to take forward God's work. If we want to see our church fulfil its ministry then each one of us needs to be a part of the action.