

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church  
on November 19, 2023.**

**FINANCIAL ADVICE**

*<Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123:1-4; Matthew 25:14-30>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

I've long felt that returning to Western New York and the Buffalo region would, in essence, be a fulfilling of my calling, a final place for me in ministry. And in the brief two and half months that I've been here, I'm reassured in that feeling. What I wasn't expecting, though, was a dream that I had within the last ten days wherein I was called up to play center for a team of the National Hockey League.

I don't think any of you should have any concern about me leaving to pursue any other calling. Because, as fantastical as that dream was, it was nothing but anxiety. The very idea of stepping into an unfamiliar, high-profile position without the attendant skills to play is laughable, though if our own local team continues in an unpredictable fashion, then maybe I shouldn't discount the idea all-together. But the subconscious feeling of anxiety and inability to live into the task at hand is one which all people, at one time or another in life, face and wrestle with. In fact, over the course of the last several years, more and more attention has been given to recognizing, and helping to deconstruct with people, the sense that they are imposters in their field of work. One author for the *Journal of General Internal Medicine* stated that "up to 82% of people face feelings of imposter phenomenon, struggling with the sense that they haven't earned what they've achieved and are a fraud." Such feelings, it is noted, can contribute to negative performance in work and life, including a greater hesitation for risk-taking in careers or relationships.

I mention all of this because it seems to me that, even if he wasn't speaking directly toward this rise in imposter phenomenon, Jesus was speaking about such realities and dynamics in his parable from today's reading.

We are fully in the midst of a series of parables regarding the caliber of faithful living that will be required of the disciples ahead of Jesus' arrest, trial, and passion, as well as for their apostleship in the years to come. This is the second of three related parables, which began with the Ten Bridesmaids last week and will continue next week, which all build off of the discourses of Jesus entering Jerusalem ahead of the Passover Celebration. Such parables tempt us to try and determine a one-to-one analogy, or to define literally what Jesus means. Such tempting efforts, however, completely undermine the use of parables in the first place. Parables are meant to be overly fictionalized stories which illustrate a general truth, rather than a specific formula. And in this case, the truth being illustrated actually has little to nothing to do with playing the

stock market, but rather to trust in the One who has placed trust in you, without fear or uncertainty. To trust in the One who has placed trust in you.

These servants, managers of their master's household, are entrusted with very large amounts of money, and the attendant responsibility that goes with that. A talent, in Biblical times, would be equivalent to somewhere in the neighborhood of 10-20 years worth of common wages. If we imagine an amount of \$350,000 for a single talent, that would be a middle-of-the-spectrum guess. From a financial standpoint, that can be a lot of money to lose through potentially risking trading. Already in this we can infer an understanding that Jesus is talking of great wealth, and great gifts, as well as great responsibility.

But again, remember that this is a parable. And in the framing of a parable, and the larger context of Jesus discussing the needs and gifts of the disciples for their lives of faith, the talent refers not direct finances but to the wealth of gifts and capabilities inherent in each of them. This, perhaps, is one of the first and most important aspects to bear in mind: Each of the disciples, in hearing Jesus' exhortations, would be reminded that they each have inestimable gifts at their disposal.

Gifts of caring and compassion. Gifts of courage and initiative. Gifts of community, support, and relationship. Gifts of exhortation and building up. Gifts of proclamation and truth-telling in love. And a myriad of gifts beyond these, as well. The disciples were entrusted with a wealth of gifts for ministry, mission, and the Kingdom of God.

And so, too, are we. This is the first truth of this parable. And the second follows along with it: We should not hesitate, nor be afraid, of using these gifts to their fullest potential and extent. Nor should we shy away from living into the fullness of who we, with such gifts, are created to be.

The mistake of the foolish servant is not that he didn't bring back more money to the Master, or that there was no Return On Investment, but rather that he didn't live into his calling, that he didn't live into the fullness of who he is, at all. The Master entrusted such gifts; it doesn't matter one whit whether it was ten talents, or five, or five hundred...the servant had been entrusted with gifts, and then he - in fear of his own perceived inadequacies or inabilities - did nothing with them. He felt himself too small, too incapable, too inadequate to meet the perceived needs of the calling. Instead, he should have trusted the calling first, and let the gifts entrusted to him raise him up to the task at hand. And that should not be a surprising *modus operandi*.

Madeleine L'Engle, reflecting on stories from Genesis, writes, "When God asks us to do something, God expects us to do it, whether we think we can or not. Many great things have been accomplished by people the world didn't think adequate to do them."

God has a long history of operating with, enabling and equipping the perceived underdog to achieve great, almost unimaginable deeds. Young David facing off against Goliath. Elijah, the singular remaining prophet of God, standing off against all the

prophets off Baal atop Mt. Carmel. The entire book of Judges is one long list of a faithful underdog listening to the call of God and trusting in the gifts of God to stand against - and win against! - a more powerful aggressor. Deborah, in our reading this morning, all but tells Barak to take a fraction of the soldiers that Sisera had at his disposal and essentially go stand where God tells you to stand. And that would be enough! If Barak would trust in God and in the gifts, the capabilities God had entrusted to him, then the outcome was not one to be doubted. It was not a matter of whether Barak was capable or inadequate; it was a matter of whether he would trust God's word and presence.

The truths of this parable still hold true for us, today. Even if we wrestle with imposter phenomenon, even if we are unsure of the gifts we have received, even if we doubt. God has entrusted each and every one of us with gifts to use in service and ministry to the good news of the gospel, and in the example of the unfaithful servant, we are to not follow suit or respond in fearful uncertainty.

Poet Marianne Williamson wrote words which speak to this. Later made famous in the Inauguration speech of Nelson Mandela, she exhorts each and every one of us who seeks to follow God faithfully, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do...As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Now, it's not likely that I'll be getting a phone call from the Sabres' front offices anytime soon. Those aren't my gifts. And this parable, while centered around money isn't really about money. Because I do have gifts, and so do you. The parable, also, isn't even about how to specifically use those gifts; it's about the spirit in which we utilize our gifts, and trust in God, the One who has given us such gifts in the first place. That can be difficult sometimes. But great risk can bring great reward, and now is the time to trust in God to see what will come. Now, go invest your talents. Amen.