

November 19, 2017: Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)  
Matthew 25:14-30: Doing Our Best

*Jeder nach seinen Fähigkeiten, jedem nach seinen Bedürfnissen.*

Do any of you have any idea what I just said. You should, I just spoke in German. Although I am absolutely certain I butchered the pronunciation.

Some of you look relieved. You thought I was speaking in tongues.

You may not have recognized the German, but you will probably recognize the English translation.

“From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”

It is a centuries-old slogan that emerged within the Socialist Movement, and was made popular by Karl Marx. It refers to the idea that once a communist society is firmly established it will result in an environment where the needs of all will be met. It sounds like a good idea in theory, but in practice, it has yet to be realized. In this sense, Karl Marx and his beliefs about socialism have not proven to be true, but Marx was right to recognize something else this slogan points out, and that is that people are not created equal.

I need to clarify that statement.

As Americans we believe passionately that all people are created equal. It is enshrined in our Declaration of Independence.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

Are all people truly created equal? What does the Bible say?

I think the Bible is clear that all people are created equal in terms of their worth. We are all created in the image of God. We are all equally loved and valued by him. We should love and value each other equally. But the Bible does not say that we are all created equal in terms of our ability, and simple observation confirms that.

For example, I have never been able to dunk a basketball, as much as I would have liked to. And it wasn't for lack of trying. In high school a few friends and I made a video of us dunking, with a trampoline. But we chose our taping angle carefully so that the trampoline was out of view. We positioned a smoke bomb underneath the basket, so it gave the appearance of us emerging from a thick fog, powerfully executing two-handed dunks. And I'm fairly certain we were playing Nate Dog and Warren G in the background.

“Just hit the east side of the LBC on a mission trying to find Mr. Warren G....”

My point is that dunking a basketball is not something that all people are able to do. The same could be said of so many other things. We do not all have the same abilities. Yet there are so many voices suggesting otherwise. Take education for example. The educational structure in our country is based upon the assumption that every single person should go to college and has the ability to succeed in that environment. And that is simply not true. We all have different skills and aptitudes. You could look at the disparity of wealth in our society. Some people who have much wealth are of the opinion that everyone could achieve the same level of success they have if they are willing to work hard enough. That's not true either. A person's abilities also play a role, and as we have already established, we don't all have the same abilities.

What I want us to talk about this morning is how this idea is so pervasive in our society, it has made its way into the Church, and into our understanding of what God expects of each one of us. We look at people like Mother Theresa or Billy Graham or even people much closer to us, friends and relatives, to borrow a phrase from the sermon a few weeks ago, the "saints we have known," and we say to ourselves, I could never accomplish those things, I could never be like that person, and we end up feeling defeated, believing ourselves to be a failure. But as this parable shows us, God does not expect the same thing out of each of us. His definition of success is very different than what our society might teach us.

The parable is fairly straightforward. In preparation for a journey, a wealthy man entrusted his property to three of his slaves, but he gave a different amount to each of them, an amount he determined according to each slave's ability. The amounts were significant. A talent was equal to 15 to 20 years' worth of wages for the average laborer, so easily over a quarter of a million dollars. Even the slave who received one talent was entrusted with a huge responsibility.

The man went away on his journey, and, while he was gone, the slave he had entrusted with five talents invested them, and doubled them to ten. Likewise, the slave he had entrusted with two talents invested them, and doubled them to four. But the slave who he had entrusted with one, did nothing with it. For reasons we will discuss in a moment, he buried it in the ground until his master's return. So of course, the value of what he had been given remained the same.

Eventually the master returned, and when he discovered what the slave with the five talents had done, he commended him, saying "Well done, good and trustworthy slave, you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.

Next he was approached by the slave with the two talents, which were now four. Because of what our society teaches us, we might expect him to say something like, "Why didn't you work as hard as this other slave?" "Why couldn't you have achieved the same thing as he did?" But he actually said the very same thing he had said to the first slave. As far as he was concerned, their accomplishments were equal.

What he said to the third slave was entirely different. At the very least, the slave could have put the money he received with bankers, where it would have earned a small amount of interest. The master was so angry for his lack of doing anything, he took his one talent and gave it to the man with ten, and ordered him to be thrown into a strange place, the place of outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It makes sense when we understand the deeper meaning behind the parable. This is about what God expects us to do with the gifts, the talents, the abilities, we have been given. He expects us to do something with them, for him and for the building of his kingdom. He doesn't ask us to break records, become famous, or reach certain objectives. He just wants us to do our best. The only way we can fail, is if we do nothing, with the gifts, with this life, that we've been given.

Why might we choose that course of action? This parable also has something to say about that.

It could be fear. This was the excuse the third slave gave for burying his talent instead of investing it. He claimed his fear grew out of the idea that his master was a harsh man would would not tolerate failure.

Related to this idea of a fear of failure are feelings of inadequacy. It's possible the third slave just didn't feel he was good enough at investing to succeed like the others, so he took the safe route and didn't even try. We have no way of knowing if that is what he truly felt, but I do know that there are people who do feel that way. They don't try things because they think they are not good enough. This parable teaches us that God is well aware of our abilities, far more than we are. Whatever he asks us to do it will either be something he has given us the ability to do or something we can do in his strength.

Another possible reason why gifts are wasted, and this is apparently the third slave's real reason, is because a person is wicked and lazy. This is what the master identified as the slave's real problem, not fear. It might make more sense for us to replace the word wicked with selfish. We might care more about using our gifts for ourselves than for what God intends. And we know what laziness is. It sometimes takes work to use our gifts and abilities. And some Christians are unwilling to do the work, or lack the discipline that is required.

There are other reasons, beyond this parable, that come to mind...

Maybe you feel like you are late to the game. You haven't been a Christian for very long and you look at people who have been Christians their whole lives, and you don't know how you could ever catch up. You don't have to. God takes all that stuff into account.

Maybe you don't know what your gifts are. There are spiritual gift inventories you can take. They are of some value, but we can help each other. If you recognize a gift in someone else, tell them about it. If you are not sure, ask another believer, ask me. Pray about it. Ask yourself, what am I passionate about. Passion about something is often a good indication that it is an area where God is calling you to serve him.

And finally, maybe you don't know where to put them to use. That's where the community comes in. Your church should do everything it can to provide each person with opportunities to serve. If you don't feel there is a place where you can use a certain gift, we can find a place. I know many of you are actively serving in ministries outside the church, and that is a good thing. A healthy church is a church that is sending people out of the church to build the kingdom.

There are many obstacles, but God can help us overcome each one.

Most of you know in my younger days I played lacrosse. I was not that good. I played in practice, and watched most of the games. Well I had a friend on my high school team, Alex, who was just as bad as I was. I wanted to tell you a story about him.

When Alex first announced that he was going to play lacrosse, everyone was shocked. If you were to look up the phrase “not athletic” in a dictionary, you would find a picture of him. Beyond his less-than average athletic ability, he had no experience playing lacrosse. And Alex was a senior. If you are familiar with high school sports and all of the politics involved, you know someone coming out to play their senior year would never get any game time, unless they were exceptional, and Alex was not.

But he wanted to play, so he tried out, and he made it, but that was only because the lacrosse team never had any cuts. Alex went to practice every day and did his best. He was picked on by the other players, and he would just brush off their comments. The coaches felt sorry for him so they gave him a few seconds of playing time each game by putting him on a man-down defense team.

Well one day, about halfway through the season, the team was in the midst of a really difficult Saturday morning practice. They had had a game the night before, and played terribly. They had lost to a team they should have demolished. The coaches were mad. The players were mad, and scared, because the coaches were mad. It was not a good place to be.

After a few minutes of running sprints and going through some drills the head coach called everyone together and began to tear into the players. He was yelling. At least half of what he said cannot be repeated here. Then suddenly, in the midst of his tirade, he paused, and said these words, *“The only lacrosse player we had on the field last night was Alex.”*

Everyone was stunned, especially Alex. The coach continued, *“He is third from the bottom in stick skills, (this is out of a team of thirty or so) but he gives it everything he’s got.”* Essentially what the coach was saying was this; a lacrosse player is not defined by how many goals they have scored, or successful passes they have made, or their ability to execute a split-dodge perfectly, but by their heart, by their willingness to give it everything they’ve got. That is how the coach defined a real lacrosse player.

Likewise, Christian faithfulness is not defined by great ability, or great accomplishments...it is defined by doing the best with what you have, no matter how big or small. Not all of us can be a Billy Graham, or a Mother Theresa, but we can all do something. We have all been given gifts and abilities by God to do his work, to build his kingdom on earth. We only fail if we waste those gifts, by caving in to fear, or feelings of inadequacy, or just plain selfishness and laziness, or if we let any of those other obstacles get in the way, and do nothing. We succeed simply by doing our best...and for that we will be rewarded. When Christ returns we will hear those words, “Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

What are you doing with the gifts, with the life, that you have been given?