

YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES!

Matthew 25:14-30

The Master gives us gifts to use for the Kingdom.

A sermon preached by
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First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
November 8, 2020

My career as an athlete in competitive sports was fairly short-lived and inconsequential. But I did play sports long enough to become acquainted with several coaches along the way. Some of my coaches were not nice people. They coached by intimidation and derogatory remarks, always critical of our performance and caustic in their language. I had one coach who loved to tell us that his 90-year-old grandmother was better at football than we junior high boys were. I didn't know his grandmother; she may have been.

But I had some other coaches that were awesome people to be around. They were competitive, but they got the best out of their athletes by encouraging us, teaching us, and being patient as we developed (up to a point, at least). I had one coach who started every halftime speech saying, "We have what it takes to win this game!" He said that because we were usually behind at halftime.

I adopted the style of the second coach in my pastoral leadership over the years. The church is like a team, with loyalty to the organization, with a mission and a purpose, with a camaraderie among the players. I have always tried to coach the team in a positive way. I try to teach the right plays, to encourage the development of talents and strengths, and to believe in the value of every player to make a contribution to the team.

That coaching style comes into play every year when we spend a few weeks talking about generosity, stewardship, and the relationship between finances and discipleship. This is not a time for judgment or criticism. It's a time for encouragement and growth and learning about a critical part of our faith. What I want to say to the team today is, you have what it takes to be successful—as Christians, as a church, as a difference-making force in our community, and as a people of generosity.

To get at this truth today, we want to look at what we call the parable of the talents. It is the next-to-last story Jesus tells in the Gospel of Matthew. A talent was not a special ability; it was a large weight of gold or silver, almost a hundred pounds' worth. It was roughly equal to 20 years wages for a working man. In today's terms, a talent would be worth in the neighborhood of \$600,000. A story about that much money would get the people's attention.

This parable is often called a parable of judgment because the wicked and lazy slave who only got one talent to start with was condemned by the master. But I think you can also look at the parable in more positive terms. All the slaves are given great gifts to work with. Even one talent was a small fortune. The slaves are praised or judged according to how they used their gifts. If you want to put the parable in five words, it's this: use it or lose it. Or in coaching terms: you have what it takes; do the best you can, and you'll be fine. But if you don't give it your all, you are going to come up short in the end.

Joe Garagiola was a major league baseball catcher who played in the big leagues for nine years, then had a great career in broadcasting. One night he was catching against the St. Louis Cardinals, and the batter coming up to the plate was Stan Musial—"Stan the Man"—one of the greatest hitters ever to play the game. The pitcher that night was a new kid pitching his very first major league game. To make matters worse, the game was tied; there were runners on second and third, and it was the bottom of the ninth inning. The tension was thick on the field. Garagiola squatted and signaled for the fast ball. But the young pitcher shook it off. So Garagiola signaled for the curve ball, but the kid shook that one off, too. Garagiola gave the sign for the only other pitch the pitcher could throw—a slider—but still the pitcher shook his head to show he didn't want to throw that pitch, either.

Garagiola called time and walked out to the pitcher's mound. "What's going on?" he asked. "I signaled for the fast ball, the curve, and the slider. What do you want to do?"

The young pitcher looked at Stan Musial standing at the plate and said, "Frankly, Joe, I was just wanting to hold on to the ball as long as I could!"¹

If you're going to be successful, you can't hold on to the ball. You have to get in the game. The good news is, you have what it takes to be successful. You have been given the gifts to be victorious.

You have what it takes to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Being a successful follower of Jesus involves a few key plays, some basic practices that a disciple learns to do over and over and over again. Eventually these practices become second nature. We Wesleyans call them "means of grace." The practices of successful discipleship involve prayer, reading and

studying Scripture, worship with the community of faith, enjoying the Sacraments, engaging in conversation with other Christians, serving others with acts of mercy, and giving of our resources to God's work.

None of these are new ideas. I talk about them all the time. It's like Sam Pittman talks to his Razorbacks about blocking and tackling—concepts the players have been familiar with since they played peewee football. But they are the fundamentals. The means of grace are the fundamentals of discipleship, and proper execution of the fundamentals brings victory.

Bishop William Willimon grew up in Buncombe Street Methodist Church in Greenville, SC. There was a disciple in his home church named Dorothy. For many years, she was the teacher's assistant in the third grade Sunday School class at the church. Every child who was ever in the 3rd grade at Buncombe Street knew Dorothy. Eventually she helped the children of parents she had helped as 3rd graders years before. Every Sunday, Dorothy would give each child a pencil and mark their names in the roll book. At the end of class, she took up the pencils. Every Sunday, for years and years, Dorothy did that. Only after the 3rd graders grew up did they realize that Dorothy had Down's Syndrome; she was mentally challenged. To the children, she was just Dorothy, the pencil lady, the teacher's helper.

When Dorothy died in her fifties—a long lifespan for someone with Down's—the whole church turned out for her funeral. Generations of third graders had been privileged to know this lady who was short on gifts as the world measures gifts. But she was long on faith. She used what she had for the Kingdom, and many were blessed. She had what it took to be a disciple.²

You have what it takes to be a missionary. We have been given a gift—the message of salvation in Jesus Christ, the good news of grace, peace, strength, and joy that come through a relationship with our Lord and Savior. We are called to share this faith with others. Jesus' last command in the Gospel of Matthew is to *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”*³

The Christian faith is an invitational faith; we want to include more and more people in our community. Some religions are not invitational at all. You have to seek them out or stumble into them or be born into a religious tradition. But Christians actively pursue other people to make disciples of Jesus. Why? Because this is life; this is joy; this is peace; this is hope—living in relationship with Christ. If you have that relationship, you have what it takes to be a missionary, to share the love of Jesus with other people.

Global missions expert Paul Borthwick shared about a friend of his named Peter. Paul stopped into a McDonald's in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and he noticed Peter working the counter. Peter was part of the young adult ministry at their church and had just graduated with a master's degree from Harvard. Fortunately, it was time for Peter to take a break, so Paul sat down with him for a cup of coffee.

Paul asked, "What are you doing here?" Harvard graduates usually set their sights a little higher than McDonald's. Peter explained that he had gone a few months after graduation without a job and had to do something to pay his bills. Paul began to express his sympathy for Peter's difficult situation, but Peter cut him off and said, "Don't be sorry. God has me here. This place is giving me awesome opportunities to share my faith. I'm on a shift that includes a Buddhist guy from Sri Lanka, a Muslim fellow from Lebanon, a Hindu lady from India, and a fellow Christian from El Salvador. It's awesome. I get to be a global missionary to my coworkers while asking 'would you like fries with that?'"

They laughed, but Peter was serious. Working at McDonald's was not part of his long-term plan, but because he saw himself as a missionary sent with a purpose, he could see his circumstances and the people around him as opportunities to work for the Kingdom. That was the "talent" he had been given to work with.⁴

If you are practicing the means of grace, you have what it takes to be a disciple. If you have a relationship with Jesus, you have what it takes to be a missionary. If you have any money at all, you have what it takes to be a person of generosity. The parable of the talents is about money, not talent. The slaves are given a ridiculous amount of money to use for the good of the master. Two of them do well; one does poorly. Two are rewarded; one

is punished. But the meaning of this parable is much deeper than good financial practices. It's about the dynamics of discipleship.

Generosity is one of the fruits of the Spirit as defined by Paul in Galatians 5.⁵ To bring this fruit to full bloom in the life of a disciple is a process. You start somewhere, and you build and grow as generosity becomes more about your heart than your bank account. It doesn't matter how much you have or how much you give; generosity is about the proportion of your wealth that you give to God. A person of limited means and little income can be very generous by dedicating a significant proportion of his or her resources to God.

The purpose of generosity is directed toward the mission of God in the world. We give to change lives, communities, and the world. We give to equip disciples to do transformative ministry. It's not about raising a budget or paying the bills of the church; generosity is partnering with the work God is doing in our midst and beyond.

Generosity, like discipleship, is a practice. As we plan our personal finances, we include God's work in the plan. We make giving a priority, and we express that priority regularly with gifts to God's Kingdom work in the world. Over time, God blesses us with the joy of making a real impact on our world.

Wayne and Ann Miller are a couple from Helena, MT, who developed into generous givers. They were both educated and practiced as social workers, but many years ago, Wayne developed a childhood hobby of coin collecting into a business. He quit social work to pursue rare coins full time and became very successful. He is known as "The King of the Silver Dollar." In 1981, Wayne and Ann started a homeless shelter called God's Love, Inc. Wayne said, "God doesn't ask you about your ability or your inability. He asks you about your availability, and we happened to be available at a time when people were wanting to start a shelter."⁶ Over the years, the Millers have given millions to charities all over the world, and their giving has made an impact on thousands of lives. The Millers are products of a Catholic faith and schooling; apparently at some point they read the parable of the talents. In an interview with *Newsweek* magazine,

Ann Miller said, “If we didn’t do this, I honestly believe God would give the money to someone who would.”⁷

You have what it takes to be a disciple, a missionary, and a generous giver. Are you ready to go there, to take the next step on your journey?

Many books and articles have been written about the religious life of Abraham Lincoln. He did not attend Sunday morning worship that much after he became President because he did not want to be a distraction to the service. But he regularly attended Wednesday night worship at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church near the White House. Dr. Phineas Gurley, the pastor, would let Lincoln sit in his study where he could hear the sermon without being seen.

One night on the way back after church, Lincoln’s aide asked him, “What did you think of the sermon?”

Lincoln replied, “I thought it was a fine sermon. Dr. Gurley had obviously put a lot of thought into the message. It was well-crafted and well-delivered.”

“So you thought it was a great sermon?” the aide asked.

“No,” Lincoln said. “It was not a great sermon.”

“But I thought you said it was well-crafted and well-delivered?”

“Yes,” Lincoln said. “But Dr. Gurley did not ask us to do something great. A great sermon calls us to something great.”⁸

I am not going to make the Gurley mistake today. I do want to call you to do something great. There is nothing greater than being a disciple of Jesus Christ. There is nothing greater than being a missionary to share your faith and make disciples. There is nothing greater than to become a person of generosity. You have what it takes to do great things. You have what it takes, at the end of your journey, to hear these words from the Lord, “*Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master!*”⁹

¹ William O. Reeves, “Use It Or Lose It,” sermon, November 14, 1993. Other source unavailable.

² William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 93.

³ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁴ Paul Borthwick, *Great Commission, Great Compassion* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 46.

⁵ Galatians 5:22f.

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2012/03/09/july-1-2011-gods-love-homeless-shelter/9075/>.

⁷ https://helenair.com/news/local/millers-to-receive-service-award/article_0ba51d7e-c846-51a7-8731-bfb8e806d3ab.html.

⁸ John Maxwell, *Everybody Communicates; Few Connect*, quoted by Nelson Searcy, Church Leader Insights, <https://churchleaderinsights.com/what-makes-a-great-sermon-great-abraham-lincolns-opinion/>.

⁹ Matthew 25:21.