

HAVE YOU GOT TALENT?

Matthew 25: 14-29; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

There's "America's Got Talent." There's "Britain's Got Talent." And there's many variations locally and internationally. Whether it's singing, dancing or performing in some way, people come forward before judges, before an audience and before the world, to show the talent they've got or the talent they think they have. It's truly emotional to see someone come forward, someone who appears to be shy and diffident and lacking any apparent talent, and then performing so spectacularly, that the judges and audience are brought to their feet in astonishment and acclamation.

On the other hand, it's truly devastating to see someone come forward who may think they have talent, but then make a total fool of themselves before the whole world. And if that's not humiliating enough, too often there is a judge like Simon Cowell, who further humiliates the person with devastating criticism. Thousands of years ago there were the public games and performances of the ancient world where people made their fame or suffered public shame and ridicule. We criticize that as primitive and barbaric. But we have come to do the very same kind of thing today as our entertainment. And it's not just the performing arts talent shows. There's cooking shows and other kinds of shows where people compete. They put themselves out there publicly. They submit themselves to judgement and evaluation, and depending on the kind of show, they can be terribly humiliated and torn apart. And this is supposed to be entertainment. Hmm...

Of course, this kind of massive public exposure has come to be in our modern world as our technology has developed. Living in a YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter world has offered us the promise of connection with the wider world, but also, greater scrutiny, criticism and ridicule in thoughtless and abusive ways. Numerous studies are coming out by social scientists and psychologists documenting the growth of destructive forms of self-absorbed narcissism where 'it's all about me' in oblivion of what's happening in the world out there beyond my screen. The world itself also gets distorted. We are bombarded with all kinds of news and figuring out what's worth trusting or even taking the time to absorb is hard to decipher. We relate to the world through a screen rather than live and in person. There is also a sharp rise in depression, especially when that enclosed world on the screen ignores me, ridicules me or criticizes me. My whole identity is tied up in how many 'likes' I get on my Facebook page.

This is especially true of a younger generation who have grown up within this type of technological world. You can feel on top of the world or totally down in the dumps

based on how much others pay attention and praise you, recognize your talent and admire you; or ignore you and even worse, criticize, shame and publicly ridicule you.

And so, we need to think and rethink who we are, our gifts and talents, and our purpose and fulfillment as human beings. And to help us get to the heart of this all, let's delve into our scripture readings.

Both Jesus and Paul are addressing an audience who live in extreme times. A word to describe their times is "apocalyptic." In more popular terms we call this "end-of-the-world" thinking. How do we live when the world around us is moving from one disaster to another and the whole thing feels like it can explode any moment? Whether it's the possibility of nuclear war, an outbreak in violent conflict, mass shootings, terrorist attacks, some pandemic, environmental disaster, storms, floods, fires or earthquakes, I think this word apocalyptic is as relevant today as it was in the ancient world. And even though we here in this part of the world can feel more buffered and secure than most in other parts of the world, we know from what happens in our personal lives that things can spin out of control quickly.

The question for us here today and for the people in Jesus' and Paul's day is this: do we live oblivious of the world around us, relinquishing all responsibility other than what's immediately in front of our noses that affects us and those close to us? Will we keep living this way until what's happening around us gets closer and closer so that it reaches us in some way and we are ill-equipped to respond because we have failed to cultivate the spiritual arts of faith, hope and love to meet the challenge?

Well, if you're willing to think seriously about the times we live in and your life-purpose in it all, you're ready for the parable Jesus tells. A parable uses everyday illustrations but with a twist. I will re-tell it with more modern-day categories we can understand better today.

There is a business owner. He has employees. The way he intends to run his business involves challenging his employees to take on greater responsibility in and for the business. And so, he plans a business trip abroad. He entrusts the resources of the business to his employees, giving different responsibilities to different employees according to his sense of what they're capable of and where their talents lie. His aim is for them to succeed and grow. How do any of us discover our talents? How do any of us build up confidence to develop our talents and use them? We need opportunity and encouragement. We need to be able to try things and fail as well as succeed. But how do we handle failure and fear of failure?

Three employees are described in the parable. One had incredible potential. She not only does well, but extremely well for the business. She not only has talent, but uses it

and develops it further with incredible results. When the owner of the business returns, he not only praises her for her great work, he also encourages her to keep growing her talent by giving her even greater responsibilities. A second employee also does very well. He doesn't have the same kind of talent as the first employee, but that doesn't matter. He also does well for the business and the owner gives him the same praise and encouragement. But notice, he also gives him greater responsibility according to his talent. The key is maximizing the employees' experience of success, not comparing them and praising them in a sliding scale. The key is them doing their best, whatever that best may be. You don't have to be the best, just do your best and be ready to grow.

But then, there's a third employee. Whether he has talent or not, what is critical is that he doesn't believe himself to have any talent. He compares himself to the other employees and feels himself deficient. He thinks about his boss and the standards he's set for the business. He feels he cannot offer any more than he's offering. The owner's philosophy is that everyone can and must grow. This employee doesn't feel he can grow. This is where the problem is. The owner of the business is understandably upset. He wants employees who want to grow and are willing to try things. He hasn't set up any employee to fail. He tells this last employee that even if he just grew what he had without having to develop anything new, that would have been enough. But having a self-defeating attitude is corrosive to the business. He wants employees with the right attitude, a "can-do" attitude. The purpose of his business is not just to make money. It's about growing people in their ability and talent. When people grow, they also experience personal fulfillment. Personal fulfillment also then shapes their self-concept and their relationships in the world. It's much bigger than just making money. In fact, making money for its own sake is not what this parable is about whatsoever.

And this brings us to the bigger issue Jesus is after. This parable is not just about developing our talent. That's important, very important. But the bigger issue is what our talent is for. Too many people have read this parable as teaching us to develop our talent with the freedom to use our talent any which way we like, to serve our interests and concerns, to put ourselves out there and get as much praise, money, recognition and power we can. This is totally wrong. Unless our talent is being used to grow the business, and unless we realize that the owner of this business is actually God, and unless we realize that the business itself is the kingdom of God on earth... unless we understand this and are prepared to commit our talents to this, our talents will be limited in their usefulness however much we grow them.

And so, the question becomes: how are we going to bring the kind of blessing into the world that advances God's kingdom on earth? How much do our talents and the way we develop them serve God's kingdom? Only as we serve God's kingdom do we also experience the kind of spiritual fulfillment that's richer than all the money, power,

popularity and recognition the world has to offer. How do we align ourselves and ground ourselves in God's purposes for us and our world? Let me end with a story:

Guillaume Vermette is a young man from Quebec. Guillaume is also a young man with a talent. He's a professional clown. Guillaume is so talented a clown that he's made being a clown a full-time business with some real success. But after years working birthday parties, private functions and public festivals, making people laugh for a profit, Guillaume felt something was missing, some larger and richer purpose. One day he had a dream. His dream was to take his talent of making people laugh on the road, going to places of tragedy, sadness, violence and misery. Guillaume Vermette, aka, Yahou the clown was transformed into Yahou the humanitarian clown. Since that decision twelve years ago now, Guillaume has travelled to remote inuit communities here in Canada and to places around the world where there is real trouble. He has clowned in Haiti, Burkina Faso, Syrian refugee camps in Greece, Burmese refugee camps in Thailand, Orphanages in Russia and many other places besides.

In conversation Guillaume rants against injustice, exploitation, prejudice and intolerance. He says that what he has seen in the last year or so convinces him that the world is becoming an uglier place. But then, he also says this: "You have to accept that you can't change the world. You have to accept that the world is a horrible place... To embody change is the best thing you can do – and to be positive." One memory, in particular, is etched in Guillaume's memory. While he was performing in a refugee camp, surrounded by kids, a fight broke out and gunshots pierced the air. Everyone scrambled to safety, except Guillaume. He couldn't hear anything over the sounds of children laughing. For a brief moment, he had lifted his audience out of their miserable reality and transported them to a place of happiness. He had done his job.

Embodying change and embodying the change we want to see in the world; or as we would put it using biblical language: serving God's kingdom with our talent; being an agent of God's kingdom wherever we are called to be and whatever we are called to do... now that's using our talent well, whatever our talent may be.

Have you got talent? Absolutely. Have you used your talent and grown it, or have you buried it in the ground? Is your talent all about you? Or is your talent in the service of God's kingdom seeking to grow roots on earth as it is in heaven. God knows we need talented servants of the kingdom. God knows we need communities of faith who inspire talent and who energize members to go out and use their talent to bless the world.

Let us pray: Meet us where we are, O God... Inspire us to believe in ourselves as you believe in us... Inspire us to figure out, try out, use and grow whatever resources and talents we have... in Jesus' name... Amen.