Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen

­­­What are your skill sets?

What can you do better than most people? Are you an artist? Can you draw with an imagination, and exactness, do you understand color in a way that intrigues people, can you tell a story with a picture? Do you have the ability to do mathematical equations in your head, can you see numbers like most people see words, is this your skill set? Can you communicate with others easily, can you speak from a podium, do you have the ability to manipulate multi-media, or are you just the type of person people follow? We all have skill sets that are beyond that of others.

Now take a minute and think of the other people who are around you this morning, and if no one else is with you think of people within your congregation, or your community, and identify their gifts. Who is the leader in your group, who is the one who brings peace, who is the one that has exceptional athletic prowess, who is the artist, which one of you is the poet, the antagonist, the thinker, who among you is the confidant, who is the giver, the healer, the photographer, teacher, dancer, who is skilled with their hands, who can fix things, who has the ability to talk to anyone? These are skill sets, some of you may have come across them naturally, while others have had to work years to attain an advanced level within a skill. Some people might only have one primary skill set in which they are very gifted, where others are a gifted in many areas but are not a master of any. And then there are some, whom you might question if they have any skill sets at all.

Our scripture today is entitled The Parable of the Talents. Some people will look at this and wonder what talents have to do with what I’ve been talking about. Well if we look at the scripture itself, talents are a measure of wealth. In fact, one talent is equal to multiple years of salary for the average person, some would say up to 15 years of wages. Let’s not get caught up on the monetary aspect of what a talent is, instead let’s look at a talent for what it is and can become, or for what a skill set is and what it can become in the eyes of God.

﻿The Parable of the Talents, Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘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.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ﻿His master said to him, ‘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.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

This is the word of the Lord.

God has given each one of us gifts. The question is how are we using them? I know of a church that at one point in time had two extraordinary mission outreach programs. One was a theatrical arts program for middle school and high school students geared toward homeschooled children, but was open to everyone. It received national recognition for the work it was doing and was considered a shining star of education in the arts. This very same church had a mission helping to train guide dogs for veterans and people with disabilities. They even allowed the dogs in training to come join church and be a part of the gatherings in their facilities so the dogs would be better trained and acclimated. These were two amazing ministries using talents of others in numerous ways to build new skills within the children who were part of the school program and for the veterans, the disabled, and the dog trainers in the other. But the church became shortsighted and decided that if these programs weren’t putting people in the pews or money into their coffers, then they were not of use to them. What they failed to see was how God was using them to help their community. As a result, the church eliminated both programs and lost all those talents, and in the subsequent years, what was a vibrant congregation has continued to dwindle more and more.

Our talents are to be stretched and manipulated in ways that we can serve God to the greater good, whether through our congregation or as individuals working within our communities, our state, or our nation. We should all be striving to put those talents to use to serve our creator. What we are being told in this parable is that not all people have the same skill sets because we are very different and unique. What we are being told is, not using those unique skills is wrong. It’s the equivalent of taking your money and burying it in the dirt. You might not lose it, but it is not benefiting anyone including you or those that it might be serving. It is not gaining any interest. It could be said that if you’re not using your talents to the fullest, or if you’re not using your talents at all, then your interest may be only in yourself and in your own security but not service to God or humanity. Mathew’s use of the phrase “to each according to his ability” indicates that for him the parable challenges Christians to make full use of the gifts that God has entrusted to them, the portrayal of the third servant reminds us that love for our Creator must be demonstrated in faithful untiring service to other people.

Christians routinely excuse themselves by protesting that their gifts are too modest to be significant. This parable insist that the gifts are precious and to be shared fully. 1 Peter 4:10 says “As each has received a gift employ it for one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”

Some people have very low self-opinions of themselves, but that is not God’s opinion. The Lord has a very high opinion of his servants abilities. Here we see two of the servants taking a risk, which of course could entail the loss of everything entrusted to them, because they know that what their lord has given them must be actively at work, must live, must affect something new. Something new, that is where we have all been the last several months. We have been in a new place, a new time, we have had to learn to do new things. I wonder how often during this new time people with various talents have been discarded because they were too old, too young, not part of the right crowd, and so on and so on and so on. COVID-19 should have given every congregation more than enough permission to seek out the help of some of the most underutilized persons in our congregations. Often ones that we look to for inspiration, but we ignore when it comes time to serve the church. It’s also a group that I hear baby boomers, of which I’m one, and others disparage because we don’t understand the world they live in. They are often defined as lazy or self-absorbed, but in all truth their world of socializing and communication is far different from anything we could have imagined as we grew up. They have the talents, they have the skill sets that are essential for the church and we need to give them the opportunity to put those talents to work. The youth and young adults of our world are the ones we need to be turning to. They have the skill set to help our churches communicate beyond the physical walls in a mission field that has become digital and can reach not only the neighbor across the street, but the neighbor living on the other side of the world.

The parable is aimed at those devoted to their own personal security and devoted to the vindication of their own righteousness. They believe they must hold onto the control of the church, rather than being devoted to God. Being devoted to God means being devoted to other people, and taking active and risky steps to help them. Jesus says, that religion concerned only with not doing anything wrong in order that the practitioner may one day stand vindicated, ignores the will of God.

God wants us to recognize the talents that are within us and how we can serve each other. Even more so God wants us to recognize the talents of others, those whom may have been overlooked because they are too young, too old, don’t have the right degree, didn’t go to the proper school, or might just not be someone we would associate with. We are all God’s children and God has given each one amazing gifts to lift up the life of others, and of the ministry of the church. Look around see who among you has talents that are being underutilized help them bring them to the forefront, help them be realized so that all those who have talents, and that is everyone of us, put them to use serving one another, serving our neighbors, and serving our Lord God.

Amen