

Use it or Lose It

Judges 4.1-7

Matt.25.14-30

Carl Jung crafted a concept that he named synchronicity. By that he meant that when a person was living their own life with deep integrity, when they were in the groove of who God/the universe called them to be, then extraordinary coincidences occurred. In the scriptures and in the church, we sometimes talk of miracles. At its worst, our hope for a miracle sometimes flows out of our laziness.

You know the person who didn't study, didn't work, didn't practice, didn't care—and just hopes for a miracle. Act in faith and miracles occur. Find the deep flowing waters of your life, let that energy carry you, and God's presence will dazzle you and bless you.

These texts today speak to us of the challenge we all face to respond to God's call and claim upon—to use our gifts creatively and yes at some risk—and to anticipate the voice of our Master saying to us 'Well done, good and faithful servant'.

Let's listen to story from Judges first. Talk about coincidence-or is it the serendipity of God? Anyway, I trust that you were both amazed and amused to hear the name Barak in this story. This is one of only a few times in the Scriptures that the name appears. And yes, the story says that through the voice of Deborah, the prophet and judge, Barak is called to be the new commander in chief of the Army of Israel.

Remember the setting. The Israelites have invaded the Promised Land, but they aren't fully in control. The authors here say that they aren't in control because of their faithlessness—they haven't been worshipping in the right way. Then Deborah comes onto the scene. She is a prophet—meaning that she is a conduit for the word of God to Israel. She is also a judge—meaning the political-military-spiritual leader of Israel. She orders Barak to come before—to raise an army and prepare to battle Sisera. Sisera by the way has 900 chariots. None apparently for Israel. So Barak has good reason to be hesitant and in fact to insist that Deborah go with him. The battle is won. Sisera flees on foot and is deceived by a woman named Jael, who at first welcomes him into her tent, offers him some milk and then while he sleeps drives a tent peg through his head. Please, please don't try this at home—don't let your kids read the Bible—don't look here for moral guidance or advice on how to win friends and influence people.

The story does though speak to us powerfully and link to the parable of the talents. God through the voice of Deborah speaks to and challenges Barak—God calls Barak to do battle and though the odds seem to be strongly against him, Barak obeys. Yes, he would like to go into battle with his friend Deborah, but she supports him, urges him on. You can do it.

Jesus offers us the parable of the talents and tells us that the Kingdom is like this. In a few minutes we will pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done. We pray with urgency for God's reign, God's presence and power of flow through us and the church and through the world. You know this familiar parable. We hear echoes in this parable of the tenants in the vineyard, where also someone with great resources goes away and leaves those resources with us. In this parable, the man with servants leaves substantial wealth with each of them. Oxford bible says that a talent was 15 years of wages. Two servants use the money and are able to return a great profit when the master comes back---when the time arrives for the final accounting---on the day of the last judgment. The third servant buries the money---because he is afraid. He is afraid because he sees the master as a hard man, reaping where he did not sow. Maybe it is as if the master is an absentee landlord. But surely the other servants had a similar experience of the Master. So what is Jesus saying to us? The third servant is so afraid of the master and of failing that he doesn't use what is given to him. Fear of failure dominates his life and so he finally doesn't live his life---he doesn't take the necessary risks to make use of the gifts the Master/God has given him.

Now, of course, you want to know the story of the fourth servant. This is the servant who was given two talents---and tried to make use of them---he worked hard to improve, to make a profit. Bought GM stock at \$20---then the market collapsed. So this servant has to report to the master---I tried---I worked---in labored and I lost the money. Now, we really want to know what the master says. What do you think? Does the Master---does Jesus the Christ of God---love us and embrace only when our lives yield a 100% profit? Or does Jesus love us for not burying our talents---ourselves in an effort to not fail. The parable itself doesn't tell us. The answer comes through our looking unto Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. The answer comes from the eyes and voice and heart of Christ speaking to our heart.

Use it or lose it! It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Practice makes perfect---but even if it doesn't, we are called to practice. Don't just sit there do something (though on the other hand it is also sometimes true that we shouldn't do anything---we should sit and listen and just be.) It is Mary and Martha. So we hear the wisdom of this parable in some of our culture's aphorisms.

Use the gift of your life to bring life and joy and happiness to the world. Love one another. Live---sometimes that even means like with Deborah and Barak that we have to do battle.

But especially in those settings where we feel we only have a limited talent, a limited resource, we are called to step out---to give it a try trusting that God wants us to live our lives to use our gifts, even if it seems like we are failing in the world's eyes. God in Christ still comes to us with Well done, good and faithful servant.

Some years ago, I led a mission group to Nicaragua that included a friend who was a Presbyterian pastor. She asked if we could meet with female pastors in Nicaragua. I contacted an organization called CEPAD, which was created by Baptists and located one of the 3 female Baptist pastors working in Managua. So our group could visit her work. I still remember the strange mixture of feelings I had as we, with our cameras, got out of the minivan in one of the dirt poor barrios of Managua. This pastor

organized several group feeding centers. It was a soup kitchen, except with rice and beans. People were so gracious to us and very glad that we came. A friend of the pastor's is a friend of ours. Then they called for the piñata in celebration of our visit. So maybe 30 kids are gathered around the piñata and finally it breaks open. Kids are scrambling in the dirt for candy—partly they scramble in greed and partly in fun. It is a painful metaphor for the sometime desperate scramble of enough resources to survive. This is the scramble of the dollar a day people—the here is your denarius people—feed your family and don't come back. In my sad reflections, I couldn't even take a picture. Then, one precious little girl comes over to me with one of her hard won candies and offers it to me. THANK YOU. Thank you so much you holy child of God. Well done though good and faithful servant. Really well done.

Peg Sutherland told me a story about a boy who lived in the church during the flood. He certainly didn't have much. Probably, his family was here without legal permission. So born in Costa Rica—comes to America with his family so they can try for a better life, even at great risk. Then the flood and they are homeless. In the image of the parable we would say that he doesn't even have one talent. He is a denarius kid—that's all. So this boy takes as his mission the call to help people have clean hands and he walked the hallways of the church with Purell. Here, wash your hands so you don't get an infection or give one. And Jesus said, Well done good and faithful servant.

Let us go out and live our lives creatively and joyously and daringly and faithfully. Let us get over the bump that cripples us by our fear of failure. Let us trust that as we live and love and serve Jesus will say to our hearts—Well done good and faithful servants.