

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Sacrificing the Gift”**

**Psalm 123
Matthew 25: 14 – 30**

February 15, 2015

Some of you may remember the great American distance runner from the University of Oregon, Steve Prefontaine. Back in the early 70’s, Prefontaine was a world-class track star and cross-country runner... who, along with athletes such as Frank Shorter and Bill Rodgers, helped launch the so-called running boom in this country.

Prefontaine, or “Pre” as he was known to his friends and fellow runners, had a reputation for being brash and free-spirited... and some would even say cocky. Nevertheless, he was revered and respected within the running community for his work ethic... his insistence on running at the front of the pack... and his willingness to push himself relentlessly to the absolute limit of his ability. Prefontaine was notorious for never taking it easy in a race... for never being content with a second place finish... and for never giving anything less than his very best effort, whether it be in practice, or in an international track meet against the greatest competition in the world.

The most memorable example of Prefontaine’s all-or-nothing commitment to winning was his courageous performance in the finals of the 5,000 meter race, in the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany. Prefontaine was a huge underdog in that race... with virtually no one but him believing that he had even the slightest chance of winning an Olympic medal. Yet, two miles into that 3.1 mile race, he had somehow managed to keep pace with the leaders... and with four laps left, he surged into the lead, hoping that his competitors wouldn’t be able to match his increasingly blistering pace.

Now, Prefontaine could have held back a little bit... he could have played it safe, conserved his energy, stayed with the pack, and very possibly snuck across the finish line with maybe a second or third place finish, and a coveted Olympic medal. But Steve Prefontaine wasn’t interested in finishing third, or even second. He wanted to win the race. And with just 150 meters to go, he was still right on the lead, valiantly trying to hold off some of the greatest runners in the world... who were by now breathing right down his neck. Pre summoned every last ounce of his strength and courage for those last 150 meters... but his body had just plain run out of gas.

And he was passed, first by the great Lasse Viren of Finland... and then by Mohammed Gammoudi of Tunisia... and then, with barely ten meters left to the finish, by the hard-charging Ian Stewart of Great Britain. Leaving Steve Prefontaine to finish in that worst of all possible Olympic positions: *fourth place*. (You can check out the race on YouTube... it’s still an amazing thing to watch.)

After the race, Prefontaine was completely devastated... and he vowed to win the gold medal at the 1976 Games in Montreal. But, unfortunately, he would never get that chance... as he was tragically killed in a car accident in Eugene, Oregon in 1975, at just

24 years of age. Yet, even after all these years, Prefontaine continues to be an inspiration for thousands of young runners, who've tried to emulate his courage and commitment to excellence in their own training and racing. And that courage and commitment to excellence is summed up beautifully in Prefontaine's most memorable personal quote: *"To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift."*

"To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift." Probably every high school cross-country runner in America knows that quote. In fact, my son's cross-country team, in his senior season, had those inspiring words written right across the back of their team T-shirts. And those are great words for any athlete to keep in mind. Because they remind us that, if we want to make the **most** of the athletic talent that we've been given... then we must be willing to **invest** our very best effort into developing it, and nurturing it, and making of it all that it was meant to be.

As we think about our lesson today from Matthew's gospel, we realize that that very same principle holds true for our Christian discipleship too... that making the most of the relationship with God that we've been given in Jesus Christ, also requires the best that **we** have to give as people of faith. Like a champion runner putting it all on the line for the chance to win the coveted prize at the end of the race... the life of Christian faith calls us to invest our hearts, our minds, and our spirits completely in the quest to know God, and to love God, and to be the people that God wants us to be.

To grow in our faith in Christ means to **risk** trusting Him when life is challenging. To grow in our hope in Christ means to **dare** to follow Him when the path before us seems uncertain. To grow in our knowledge of Christ means to **work** at understanding Him when His way seems so different than our own way. This, I think, is one of the points which Jesus was trying to make in the Parable of the Talents, which we read together this morning in Matthew 25.

In this parable, Jesus is giving a description of what life is like in God's Kingdom... or, to put it more precisely, it's a description of how we should be **living our lives as subjects** of God's Kingdom. And as we reflect on the parable, two facts immediately jump out at us: first, the fact that God has **entrusted** us with gifts and talents to use in the service of His kingdom... and second, the fact that what we **do** with those gifts and talents really does matter, and really does make a difference.

In the story, Jesus describes a wealthy and powerful nobleman... who's about to leave on a lengthy journey. But before he goes he calls together his servants and entrusts them with the care and oversight of various amounts of his property. And so we're told that, to one servant he gives five talents of gold, to another servant three talents, and to the final servant he gives one talent (a talent, as I said earlier, being an amount of gold, equal to about fifteen years' wages for a laborer in ancient Israel.) And after doling out his riches and assigning responsibility, the man departs on his journey... leaving the servants behind to make good and profitable use of the considerable gifts which they've been given.

Now, according to the text, two of the servants immediately put their gifts and talents to work: *"The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more."*

In other words, they went out and invested their talents; they put their gifts to use in ways that would be profitable; they took some chances and applied some creativity in the hope that they would increase that which their master had given them. Yet, in spite of the risks, and in spite of the possibility of failure... the first two servants went out and did something. And, as we're told, their efforts were blessed with success... to the tune of a 100% increase on their investment (a return that probably most of us would be more than happy to live with!)

But, according to Jesus, the third servant, who'd received the one talent, *wasn't* so willing to take it, and to use it, and to try to accomplish something great with it. Instead, in fear and anxiety, this servant hid his talent away... where it would sit, unused and untested, until such time as the master returned from his journey, at which time it could be safely given back to him. As Jesus said: *"But the man who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."*

Of course, by taking this "play it safe" approach, the third servant ensured that he would *not* suffer any loss on the gift which had been given to him. But he also ensured that he wouldn't realize any gain, either... and that he'd be in *exactly* the same condition when the master came back home, as he was when the master had gone away.

Well, Jesus goes on to tell us that, eventually, the master returned from his journey... and upon arriving home, he summoned his servants to settle accounts with them, and to see what they'd done with the talents which they'd been given. And, of course, the first two servants report their great success... and the master rewards them for their effort and initiative by granting them even more gifts and blessings. As Jesus tells it:

"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'

"The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!'"

But then it came time to settle accounts with the one-talent third servant... and the outcome is not so cheerful.

"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.

And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Instead of being praised and commended for playing it safe, and cautious, and prudently close-to-the-vest with his gifts and talents... the third servant is severely criticized, and he winds up losing his talent because, out of fear or laziness or indifference, he refused to do anything with it. His master had given him a truly great gift... but he wound up sacrificing it because he wasn't willing to give his all, and to do his best with that which he'd been given.

And so Jesus reminded His disciples, and you and me, too, about how we should be living our lives as subjects of God's Kingdom... as people of faith, who are part of the Lord's family here and now, who are trying to follow His will and live by His truth. And the reminder is that we're to live as God's subjects in the same way that Steve Prefontaine trained and ran his races. With courage... with commitment... with conviction... with the staunch resolution to make the most we can, out of whatever good gifts the Lord has given us!

Obviously, we don't all have the same gifts, we don't all share the same talents, we aren't all asked to reach the same great goals for the sake of God's Kingdom. But all of us have *some* gift or other; each of us has been entrusted with *some* talent or other; every one of us has been called to make *some* difference or other for the cause of Christ in the community, at work, at school... out in this society which, in many ways is so far from Him.

Like the servants in our lesson, our gifts and talents differ, in kind... in number... in visibility... in function. We're not all asked to do the same things, to follow the same paths, to make the same difference, to accomplish the same ends. All we're asked to do is to take whatever it is the Lord has given us and not sacrifice it... but instead use it, as best we can, to His glory and honor and praise. All we're asked to do is to give nothing less than our best... in all our efforts to serve our Heavenly Father, and follow our Lord Jesus Christ. All we're asked to do is to take a chance, take a risk, and dare to become the people that the Lord has made us to be.

How has the Lord gifted you... in your life, in your faith, in your experience as a Christian disciple? With what talents have you been entrusted... for the service of our Master, who's called us, and who loves us, and who desires to use us to accomplish His purpose in this world? In your walk with Christ, where do you need to stand up, to be counted, to get serious, and to give your best effort in your daily quest to serve Him with heart, mind, and body?

May we make it our goal to answer those questions in the days and weeks ahead. And as we do so, may our ultimate goal always be to hear our Master say, *“Well done, good and faithful servant!”*

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!