

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 ~ Matthew 25:14-30
 Can You Hear God Calling? Activating our Spiritual Gifts
 1st of 3 Sermon Series: *The Angel in the Rock*
 5th Sunday of Easter ~ Ordination/Installation of Church Officers ~ May 7, 2023
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Introduction to Scripture Reading

I know we live in the USA where we have Presidents and not Kings and Queens, but did any of you happen to notice that yesterday was "Coronation Day" in Britain? Yes, in case you hadn't heard, yesterday Prince Charles became King Charles III over on the other side of the pond. Thanks to the Disney hit movie, *Frozen*, set in the magical kingdom of Elsa and Anna of Arendelle, back when our now five-year-old granddaughter Isabel was two, the word "coronation day" was already in her active vocabulary. Early one morning when they were visiting at our home, she started running around opening up every cabinet she could reach saying "it's K-nation day!!" (Her mom had to interpret this for us, since we had no idea what she was saying.)

For us here in soggy Marshfield, today is not "K-nation Day" but it is "Ordination Day." I'm pretty sure toddlers who know what Ordination Day might be, are rare. Here, not in the fantasy land of Arendelle, but in the actual outpost of God's kingdom commonly known as FPC, we are ordaining two elders and two deacons whom you all elected, from among our members. Rather than crowns, they will receive the "Laying on of Hands." And unlike King Charles III, I don't imagine any of them has known since they were three that being ordained today would be their destiny. However, these four people have heard God calling them to these offices, and later in this service they will be making life-time ordination vows. Promises to God and to us that are intended to help them activate and develop their unique spiritual gifts to lead us in the building up of Christ's body. As we all seek to be Christ's hands and feet, building God's kingdom on earth, from right here on the corner of Lincoln and Adler.

Inspired by this occasion of Ordination Day today, which is also the 5th Sunday of Easter, I am launching a three-week mini-sermon series that will take us through the rest of Eastertide through to Pentecost, titled: "*Can You Hear God Calling? Activating Our Spiritual Gifts.*" No, you won't find that title in today's bulletin. It's written with invisible ink. (Just kidding... Proofing bulletins is obviously *not* one of my spiritual gifts.) What are your spiritual gifts? We all have them. Whether we know it or not. Jesus' *Parable of the Talents* teaches us this fun and fearsome fact!

Before I read it, I want to give you some quick guidelines to remind you of how best to listen to Jesus' parables. Wise words from Jewish New Testament scholar, Amy-Jill Levine: "Resist the urge to tame a parable down to a simple platitude like "Be nice" or "God loves us... Good though they may be, we lose the genius of Jesus' teaching intended to prompt us to see the world in a different way, to challenge, and at times, to indict." She suggests instead we do this: "we might be better off thinking less about what they "mean" and more about what they can "do": remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb... Jesus understood that God does not play by our rules... His God wants us to be better than we are, because we have the potential to be"ⁱ

Sermon

You may have heard the story about the day when Michelangelo, the great Italian sculptor, was pushing a large rock down a street and a neighbor, sitting on his porch observed how Michelangelo was struggling mightily, to move this rock along. And so, the neighbor called out and asked him why he was laboring over just an old piece of stone. Michelangelo is reported to have answered, *"Because there is an angel in that rock that wants to come out. To be set free."*

Some of us may feel like old pieces of stone this morning. Not even sure who pushed us down the street to get us in our pew today. And sometimes our beloved church, yes the Body of Christ we call FPC may seem like "just an old piece of stone." With aging heat units that we are replacing and hair-raising electric bills our beautiful "new" building at age twenty, is aging. But here's the Good News, the amazing news: There are angels inside each of us as individuals and as a church body that want to come out. God entrusted us with them. God can see them whether we can or not. Can we trust God to set them free?

Take a look around our sanctuary, remote worshippers look in the mirror if you are alone or at one another if you have company right now: What do you see? Familiar faces, new faces, tired faces, sleepy faces, distracted faces, silly faces, and some sad ones, too. Beautiful faces all. Whatever faces you see with your eyes or with the eyes of your heart, inside every one of them there is much more. Untapped potential. Inside each of you are gifts from God waiting to be discovered, to be set free.

As Jesus said to his disciples in his farewell discourse in John 14:12, God has implanted in us the potential to do even greater works than what Jesus did while on earth. If only we believe in God's greatest gift to us. Imagine that. Greater works than Jesus did? Greater acts of compassion? Acts that could end homelessness or hunger. Greater healing? Greater works that would heal the scourge of gun violence raging across our country? Greater works that could transform our health care system to provide adequate mental and physical health care for all people? Greater works like a workable, just immigration policy? Greater works that might actually pump the breaks on the path toward destroying our planet that we continue to barrel down at an alarming speed? Can you still see them, Jesus? Better get out the chisel, we need those angels set free!

Did you hear the verb "entrusted" in the parable that I just read? Although I will remind you not to resist reduce God to being the property owner in this parable, the lesson behind that verb, "entrusted" does teach us about how God relates to us. I hear Jesus trying to teach us how God has entrusted us *all* with gifts and talents. One talent was equal to fifteen years wages--not too shabby a gift right there. Of course, we like to think that we are more like the five-talent guy or the two-talent guy. And in some ways, we surely are. But not completely. Parables are not meant to let us off the hook, nor to write others off as lost causes. God loves the "both/and." The crime of the one-talent guy was burying the gift which was entrusted to him. The soul-killing motive was one we all share with him: fear. "I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Leaving that angel hidden and trapped inside the large stone is a big mistake. It

leads to death for us as individuals, and as a church. Death to God's world Christ came to save. We can see how this fear inside seems to be accelerating in its destructive power across our land. That fear can destroy quietly or loudly. And this epidemic seems to be gaining strength, mutating in horrific ways. God knows the list of things you can do that could get you killed in public grows by the day. From knocking on the wrong door, to going to the wrong mall to shop on a Saturday afternoon.

Does anyone know where the love of God goes when the waves turn the minutes to hours? This arresting line of poetry was written by Canadian folk singer, Gordon Lightfoot, and comes from his heart-rending ballad, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." He wrote this song inspired by the tragic sinking of Edmund Fitzgerald freighter ship on Lake Superior, or the "gichi-gami by the Ojibwe (Great Sea). It was on the night of November 10, 1975, that all 29 crewmen of this ship died tragically. Although Gordon Lightfoot died just this past Monday at 84 years old, his songs like this one will live on. This song became a hit, even though it defied all normal markers for a hit song: it was way too long, way too serious, and had no single, repeated catchy phrase. And yet it grabbed everyone who listened. *Does anyone know where the love of God goes when the waves turn the minutes to hours?* What about when the hurt, the trauma, the shame, the emptiness, *turn the minutes to hours?* It speaks to the fear in the pit of all our stomachs that can drive us to either bury ourselves literally or metaphorically (in one way or another) or drive us to act out, sometimes violently, publicly, tragically.

Does anyone know where the love of God goes? Here, in this place, within our Beloved Community, on our better days, together *we do know where the love of God goes*, especially in our darkest hours. We know, maybe not here (*point to head*) as much as here (*point to heart*). The love of God is the greatest gift inside each of us. Love that we know is greater than our fear. We know this in our gut because God raised Christ, who asked this very question as he hung on the cross in his final moments. From death to life. But we forget. We get scared. That's why we need each other and this Beloved Community of ours.

You may try to find the answer elsewhere. You could ask Chat GPT where the love of God goes. I am sure your intelligent AI Chatbot cannot give you the answer. (Okay, resist the urge to ask your smartphone, at least during my sermon.) AI can provide you with Google Maps or give you an idea of how to reply to an email. Handy, helpful, but limited. You can talk to Alexa or Siri; those two chatty bots will always give you some answer. But Scientist Henning Beck (in a TED talk) asserts that new ideas and new thoughts are unique to the human brain. I would say, new ideas, new thoughts, creativity, innovation are the gifts and talents God gives us, God's offspring.

We are *all* chips off the divine block. With angels inside waiting to be set free. As British, medieval mystic Julian of Norwich wrote 650 years ago, "We become God – God becomes us."ⁱⁱⁱ If and when we let God chip away at that big stone that is also us. "Will you seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" In a few moments, you will hear our elders and deacons take that vow. When they do, listen for the sound of the chisel against the stone.

ⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2014), p. 4 and p. 300.

ⁱⁱ Amy Frykholm, "Julian the Theologian," *The Christian Century*, May 2023, pp. 58-62.