

“Abundant Assets”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
November 19, 2023 - Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost - Prop. 28
[Judges 4:1-7; Matthew 25:14-30](#)

Deborah was talented -- imminently talented. Living sometime after Moses, after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River and had come into the land of Canaan, talented Deborah held court under a palm tree in the hill country north of modern Jerusalem. Judges in ancient Israel, similar to our judges, made binding decisions for people in conflict, and so that Deborah held this powerful role at all tells us that she was exceptionally talented, gifted by God, and must have been uniquely esteemed for her wisdom in a society in which women were not usually leaders or held any kind of power outside of their own households. But Deborah held the powerful role of judge, and not only handled disputes between people, but, as other judges of Israel after the time of Moses, she would have governed over a whole region and also served as a military commander, as we heard in today's lesson from Joshua that she commanded an army to go into battle and provided for them their military strategy. The lesson also tells us that mighty Deborah not only judged between people, governed them, called their army into battle, and provided their battle plan, but that she managed her own household as the wife of Lappidoth, and was a prophet of God, one who spoke God's words to her people. Her Linked-In profile, or whatever the ancient equivalent of that was, must have been quite impressive as she served as a religious leader in addition to wearing all of her other hats (or helmets). Yes, Deborah was indeed supremely talented.

She was so in a way of the servant in Jesus' parable of the talents, that we heard in our gospel lesson, who received five talents from a trusting and traveling master and then turned them into five more. As one talent was an exceptionally heavy chunk of silver, worth about fifteen years' wages for a common worker, five talents of silver was a great treasure to be given to care for. One might be tempted to bury the treasure or otherwise guard it closely so that it would be given in full back to the master upon his return. But that's not what the skilled servant did. Upon receiving the great sum, immediately, the greatly talented servant worked the money by trading with it. A second servant, who was also

entrusted with a great sum by receiving two talents, but perhaps was not as talented with handling money as the first servant, also invested the amount received and doubled it. A third servant, however, received one talent, still an exceptionally large amount of money to care for, but instead of investing it or doing something else useful with it to make it grow, buried it, which was not an uncommon thing to do then with a treasure a person wanted to keep safe. The master, though, had no designs to keep things safe, but was instead giving the servants their varying sums of money so that they could make the money work as they were able to. So the third servant, while being able to manage one talent in a way that made it grow and being expected by the giver of the talent to do so, did not work it, but stuck it in the ground. In this, the servant produced an epic fail, like the five foolish bridesmaids of last Sunday's gospel lesson who also failed to do their one job, and the third servant joined those bridesmaids outside, where they wept and gnashed teeth together (we'll hear next Sunday the third of three parables in this gospel section, where others will join them in weeping and gnashing after their own epic fails).

There was no weeping or gnashing of teeth for those servants who did what they were expected to do, taking the money entrusted to them and putting it to work. Those servants were given oversight of even more of the master's talents, to put them to work as well. And they were made joyful.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, we joyfully celebrate with gratitude the cornucopia of gifts that God has entrusted to each of us. Whatever wealth we have obtained, like talents of silver, we have done so, perhaps through hard work, but more so because of the gifts of others who have provided an environment that has allowed for our success, and so we are thankful to God for the others have used their resources to bless us. If we have been given by God, like formidable Deborah, talents of wisdom to judge, ability to administrate, insight to govern, savvy to command, a prophetic voice to speak, crushing power over gender role barriers or other society-created constraints, and an ability to juggle sharing a household with others while doing all this, recognize that whatever skills and abilities we do have, though we may have worked hard to obtain them, are also gained and held only by being in an environment that allows us to flourish. And so for whatever talents we have, whether they are the monetary kind or the ability kind, we give thanks to God and others.

We give thanks today in our prayers and songs, and many of us will gather with family or friends or others this week and offer other expressions of thanksgiving, but the best way for us to thank God and others for the talents and other gifts we have received, today and always, is by putting them to work for God and others. For all that we have has not been given to us for us to hoard, like Ebenezer Scrooge or Scrooge McDuck, sticking them in a safe, or in an underground vault, or in a hole in the earth, but to put them to work so that we can return them to God with interest. We are called to be faithful stewards of God's gifts, growing these abundant assets, by offering our treasure, talent, and time to bless God by blessing others.

How will you put your abundant assets to work for God? How will you use them to create environments that allow others to flourish and grow? How will we as a church community use all that has been entrusted to our care by previous generations in ways that make our abundant assets grow for the good of future generations? How will we, day by day, increase the blessing we offer to each other here and also the community we serve together?

Our spiritual ancestor Deborah did not stick her talents in the ground. Spiritual ancestors who lived in more recent times and provided this church facility for us didn't stick their talents in the ground either. Let us carry on their tradition of using what has been entrusted to our care so that we can pass on a greater gift to those who will follow us and inspire them to continue passing on God's love, joy, and peace. Amen.