

Peninsula ASPCA. Edmarc. Challenger Little League. Trinity's community garden. The Virginia Food Bank. Wild at Heart Rescue. What do all of these things have in common? These are just a small sample size of the groups our youth have supported with their Confirmation projects over the last seven years. These are just a small sample size of the way that the parable of the talents has had an actual, visible impact on the lives of not only our kids, but on the community around us. Now, if you have no clue what I'm talking about, let me explain.

Every year, our Confirmation kids are given a project. The projects rotate on a two year basis, and one of those years is the year that the kids mostly know as, the year Pastor Tina gives us money. Which is actually really accurate. Every other year, each Confirmation student is given \$20 and then encouraged to go home and read our gospel this morning. The point of this project is for them to literally grow their talents, grow that \$20 into something bigger than it started. It's one of my favorite times of year, because number one, our kids' creativity never ceases to amaze me and number two, it shows how what our kids are passionate about, where their heart lies, and they all tackle the project in different ways. Over the years, you all have bought cookies and dog toys and greeting cards and keychains and countless numbers of other items, all in support of these projects. Those

kids used their \$20 to buy supplies to make whatever they were going to sell and then all of their proceeds went to the charity of their choice. This is where we have seen our kids show their passion for animals and caring for those in shelters, their heart for wanting families struggling in the midst of a child's health diagnosis to know that they are loved.

One of our kids used his passion for baseball to grow his talents. He used his \$20 to buy items to put together gift bags for members of Challenger Little League, a little league program for youth and young adults with different abilities. He then gave those bags out to players when his team played a game with Challenger. Another of our kids took her \$20 and knew she wanted to help feed people, so she gave it directly to the Virginia Food Bank, but also went and got a tour of their facility and saw just how far \$20 would go in feeding multiple families. Another of our kids took her passion for gardening and grew her \$20 to expand another one of our youth's projects. She bought seeds for Nathan's garden project and then set up a seed library in the library where others could contribute seeds so we could keep the garden growing long into the future.

Every time I give the kids this project there's always that question, will \$20 still be enough? Inflation, everything costs more, will they be able to do something with it? And every other year, I am blown away at what our

kids can do with that small amount of money. Now sure sometimes they pool it together so it goes a little further, but more often than not, with just \$20 they grow their talent into something that impacts more people than they can probably even count. They turn \$20 into a blessing for others, looking inward and saying what in God's creation am I passionate about and how can I grow that into something bigger?

Now I'll be honest, I'm not sure if I'm happy or annoyed with the Holy Spirit that she put this as the gospel for this Sunday, on a day when we have a congregational meeting that has a lot to do with stewardship and how we handle the gifts we have been given, but let's be real, the gospel is better than trying to tackle the doom and gloom of Zephaniah this morning. We get enough of that from social media and the news on a daily basis, so the gospel it is!

We know the rhythm of this parable. Jesus is in the middle of Jerusalem, just trying to get out all of the teaching he can before he is arrested. He's telling the disciples parables of how they are to anticipate his second coming, how they are supposed to live in the interim time between his death and resurrection and his coming again. Last week, we got the message of keeping awake and being prepared, and this week, we get the

message about how to tend to the talents, in whatever way you interpret that word, that you have been given during this waiting time.

Jesus basically lays out a scenario where three different men are given three different amounts of money to manage while their master is away. One is given what would be our modern equivalent of \$10 million, one about \$2.5 million, and another about a million dollars. So this isn't exactly a measly amount of money. We have no idea what the master's goal is here, because it seems like a pretty big ask to entrust three people with almost \$15 million of your money, but here we are. The first two go out and essentially play the stock market, they invest, they maneuver, they multiply the money exponentially. The other one is terrified he is going to get this wrong, invest incorrectly, and then have to deal with his less than kind master when he tells him he lost everything. When the master comes back the first two are extravagantly rewarded, they are put in charge of even more money, while the last one has his money taken away and given to the one who already has plenty, and he's thrown into the outer darkness, kicked out of the community, and away from his master all together.

It's not a pretty scene. As one of my kids in chapel said this week as we read another one of Jesus' later parables, "That got *really* dark, Pastor Tina." And it's kind of hard to not be like, yeah, this is really dark, and if

God is the master here, then yikes, this isn't a good picture, nor is it exactly warm and fuzzy and comfortable, and yet, just because it isn't any of those things, doesn't mean that it isn't the gospel. We have to reckon with what it means to be entrusted with gifts and how we use them, individually, communally, and out in God's kingdom.

There are so many ways that we can approach this and that is almost overwhelming. We could look at the talents as the literal gospel, the good news, and what God calls us to do with that out in the world. Do we hoard it for ourselves, hoard it until we're certain that the person we might share it with fits the mold of what we think it worthy of it, or just throw it out into the world as often and as widely as we can because God calls us to literally share the gospel and God's love with everyone, anyone, everywhere, anytime? That's kind of the more comfortable way to examine this though.

The less comfortable is talk about the fact that when Jesus tells this parable, the talents are literal money, literal gifts that the master entrusts over to the workers. Now the unhelpful view of this is that some would interpret it as, well then God is who decides who has how much money in the world, and that's just icky, bad theology, so we're going to set that aside, and think about this from the angle of the word we all just absolutely shy away from...stewardship.

As a community of faith, we cannot be here, in this place, in the way we would like to be, without each of us being committed to genuine stewardship of the gifts we have been given. It's not fun to talk about money, it's not fun to talk about finances, and it doesn't feel like the gospel, and yet...part of our commitment to being a part of this community together is giving out of what we have so that we can continue being in this place together. It's up to each of us as individuals to examine our hearts, to examine what we have been given and say how am I giving back, how am I contributing? Am I giving what I can? What I want? What I think is acceptable without being "too much?" Every year, we commit to another year of ministry together, but we cannot make that happen without the actual, literal gifts we have been entrusted with being stewarded faithfully by each of us. The burden shouldn't fall on a select few, but on all of us to examine and say this is what I have...and this is what I can give back.

As a community of faith, we have been entrusted with the gifts of others, gifts that have been faithfully given throughout a life, and given faithfully at the end of one's life, and we have to make sure that we are honoring those gifts with faithful hearts, and thinking about the beloved saints we just celebrated and how they would want them to be distributed and used within our community. Talk about good news and not hoarding it,

when someone comes to the end of their life and faithfully says, I want to give back to my community. We have to steward those gifts with a heart and mind bent on the generosity of that person, not just saying thank God for their money so we can keep going, but how can we faithfully honor them?

I wish more than anything that Jesus just said this isn't something we have to worry about. That what we do with our time, our money, our literal talents is solely up to us and is separate from our life of faith, but it is in fact the exact opposite. Everything we are, everything we have is tied up intimately in the life of faith that we have, as much as we would sometimes like to deny it. What we put in the offering plate, what we're willing to give of our time and participate in, what we know we are good at and how it might benefit our life here as a family of God—all of that is from God and we have to honestly and openly think about how we are called to use all of it in service of God's kingdom and our community of faith. None of us can tell the other what to do, even though it is way more fun and way easier to do that, all we can do is faithfully examine our own hearts, what we have to offer in all facets of our life and then ask ourselves...is my life here where I want to give back, is this community where I want to put my heart and my effort? Each of us has been given a great deal to be thankful for, it's now just up to us what we do with those talents. **AMEN!!!**