

Scripture: Romans 12:4-8; Matthew 25:14-30

Message: Ripples of Giving

March 22, 2020; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Lent 4

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In this topsy-turvy world that we are living in, we also must remember that there are many ordinary things in life that continue. We must remember that our own identity as a child of God hasn't changed. We remember that we continue to be the person God made us to be. We can live our lives responsibly, even if there are a number of inconveniences affecting our daily routines.

And so this morning, we continue with our Ripples of Giving series from Romans 12 and the gospel of Matthew, as a reminder that we continue to live our lives as God's children. We continue to live out the identity of who God made us to be, to impact our world with his grace.

That's the theme that we find in these next verses in Romans 12. The chapter began with the reminder that we live in view of God's mercy. It's all about what God has done to restore our relationship with him. In response, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices; we take the yoke of Jesus and learn the unforced rhythms of grace. We serve in humility, as Jesus came to serve and not to be served.

In offering ourselves, in our lives of service, we live out the gifts that God has given us.

Every Christian has at least one gift. The list in these few verses in Romans 12 is by no means exhaustive of the gifts available. The wide variety of the gifts available is grounded in the same grace shown to all. God's grace, his undeserved love in action, is free and the same for everyone. It is according to the royal freedom of his grace that he gives different gifts to different persons. The gifts are given for the fulfilment of different functions.

It is interesting to note that out of the seven gifts referred to in these verses, no less than four have to do with the practical assistance of those who are in one way or another specially in need of help and support. This emphasizes the importance of the place of service to one another. We are not here for ourselves, but for the sake of others. How much of your time is spent for yourself or your own enjoyment? How much of your time is spent serving the Lord or helping others?

In a world that is reeling from the reality of a new virus, how do we care for one another? We are not asked to do *everything*, but we *are* expected to use the gifts that we have: to teach others and keep informed, or to care for others in their fear and struggles, or to encourage others who are discouraged and feeling overwhelmed, to lead in a way of hope

and wisdom.

God has given each of us a place to fit in the body of Christ. Find where you fit. Then exercise your gift diligently, cheerfully, doing your best in service for the Lord.

We get another perspective on this from Jesus' words in Matthew 25. In that chapter, Jesus presents 3 parables to tell us how we must be ready for his return. The first speaks of the *need* to be ready; the third speaks of the *judgment* at that return. The second parable, often called the parable of the talents, speaks of what we should be doing *now*, our present work or busyness.

A wealthy man, going on a journey, placed responsibility for the ongoing operation of his business in the hands of three of his servants. He knew his staff well and recognized their differing qualifications. Therefore one received 5 bags of gold, another 2 bags of gold and another one bag of gold, each according to their ability.

It would be easy to criticize the landowner for being unfair or discriminatory in giving his servants different amounts of money to work with. However, we must look more closely and see the great fairness and wisdom by which this action was taken. The landowner gave according to ability. He did not over-burden anyone, nor did he make their responsibilities too simple for their abilities.

We have a God who treats each of us as unique individuals. God does not generalize or lump us into family groups. "Hmm, let's see, that family is very musical so she must be musical too." He gives us gifts or skills or opportunities according to our individual ability to make use of them. Therefore the work I do is different from yours. Your work is different from someone else. We have different skills and abilities "according to the grace given us," and we must use what we have.

The question we must consider is: "are you being faithful? What are you doing with what God has given you?"

Another key principle in all of this is that whatever we have, whether opportunities or abilities or skills, they are not ours. They belong to God. What we have is still God's. The servants in the parable were given a certain amount of money. This was not a wage for them to keep. It was a trust for them to work with. It still belonged to their master, even though it was in their possession.

This is also seen in their response when the master returns. They return everything to their master to whom it properly and actually belongs. Listen to the faithful servants of the parable. When they came before their master they said, "Master, you entrusted me with these

talents; see, I have gained more." They were pleased to have faithfully served their master and to have made a profit for him. They did not grudgingly give him the results of their hard work. They did not demand a cut for themselves. They were glad to serve.

The skills and abilities, the money or opportunities which we have to work with, belong to God. He has given us use of them by his grace. We may not be selfish with what we have. We may not use what God has given only for our own advantage. Since what we have belongs to God, we must use it for him, for God's glory, for God's purpose, serving God and one another.

We don't necessarily want to look at what happens to the third servant who did nothing with his money. This servant was held accountable, not so much for what he did *wrong*, but more for what he did *not do*. This servant was not such a bad person. He did not squander the money he was given on booze or wild living (like the prodigal son, for example.) He did not steal it or use it for his own benefit. He was better than that.

Therefore he also considered himself faithful. "I took good care of your money, Master," he says. "Here it is. I am giving it back to you to the very last penny." But that is *not* what Christ considers faithfulness—just to stay where we are and do nothing.

If you believe you have grace from God, if you agree that you have abilities from God, and only keep what you have without working with it or building on what you have, it is an empty thing. To have as our only aim and purpose in life that of keeping up our present position, maintaining life as it is, we are no different than the person condemned as a wicked, lazy servant.

Let it be clear that it's not about using our gifts to make a remarkable profit. Nor are we required to produce remarkable results. Rather, not to do what is right is what is judged. Not to live for Christ and be of use to others with abilities God has given us is what is judged. Not to bring glory to the name of the Lord by taking our place as a member of the body is what is considered lazy.

"In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us." (Romans 12:5-6). We see each other, with our individual abilities and contributions, as utterly necessary, as wonderful members of the body, as partners with whatever we are good at that advances God's kingdom bit by bit.

We don't downgrade someone else or their ability. Nor do we envy someone else's ability over against whatever we contribute to life. We don't compare abilities as better or

more important. Instead, and in humility, we are grateful for what God has given to us. We are grateful for what God has given to others.

The ripples of grace flow from us as we use the gifts God has given us, by his grace. We encourage each other to use and develop the gifts which God has given.

How do we do that right now? How can we use our gifts when there are so many restrictions on what we are allowed to do? This is a good time to think creatively, to think outside the box. Don't wait for everything to return to normal, to get back into the old routines. As you are aware of your gift, brainstorm about ways that you can exercise that gift. If you're not sure what your gifts are, talk to a few friends to help identify and confirm them. Talk it out with some other people about what you can do with your gift. Throw around ideas that you might have never thought about before. It's a great time to try a new avenue of ministry.

Look at me. I had not considered an online, video message, but the cancellation of Sunday services has challenged me to step outside of my own comfortable space and record a service, with no one sitting in the pews. It is a way that I can continue to use the gifts that God has given me.

Another avenue that we can develop is something called mentoring. Mentoring is a relationship where someone with greater experience walks alongside someone who is just discovering or developing a particular gift or interest. We might think it is a negative thing to have a lot of seniors in our church. Or we can see that we have a lot of people with experience that can be shared with others. To whom can you be a mentor, to share your ability and help someone else develop theirs? Who will you learn from? Who will help you to develop your gifts?

True, there are limits on how to carry this out right now because of the need for social distance. At least in the way we used to do things. But life doesn't stop. Let's think and talk creatively with one another. Let's see how the ripples of grace can impact our community.

We are members together of the body of Christ. By his grace, God has given us different gifts to use for the blessing of those around us. What will you do with the gift given to you?

To God be the glory!

Amen.