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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, November 4, 2018
All Saints Sunday/Lectionary 31/Proper 26/Year B
Primary Text: Mark 12:28-34

Sermon Title: “*Reflecting God's Goodness with our Talents*”

Theme

Almighty God, you have taught us in your Son that love fulfills the law. Inspire us to love you with all our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength, and teach us how to love our neighbor as ourselves, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Text

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard [Jesus and the Sadducees] disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³²Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Sermon

Welcome to the second installment in the three-part 2019 Stewardship Campaign which we have entitled, "Reflecting God's Goodness."

I began last week by telling you that traditionally the church has considered personal stewardship to have three aspects; Time, Talent, and Treasure. Last week we discussed Time, but in doing so I told that I have always thought that time and talent are a bit blurred.

Let me offer an example. Joan Gent is our musician and Administrator of Worship and Music. She has taken music lessons for years, from piano and organ lessons as a child to her bachelor's degree in music education. Ask her and she will tell you that she is a pretty good sight-reader, which means she can just sit down at a keyboard and look at the black notes on white paper and just play, and it will come out pretty well. With a little practice, she can master anything. So is this a result of her years of training, education, and practice, or is it a God-given talent? Even she wonders.

But then add to that, that she can write lyrics. She told me I didn't have to mention this, but did you realize that we used the same Hymn of the Day tune during each week of the Seven Faith Practices series, but the lyrics every week were different and appropriate for that particular Faith Practice? Yea, Joanie did that.

And having been a worshiper all my life, it has been my experience that the talent of musicians varies greatly. And I can tell you there is a difference between playing the right notes and having a feel for music – do you know what I mean, a feel for the music? We are blessed to have Joan as our musician and Worship and Music Administrator.

The same can be said of Stephanie Chizmar, our Choir Director. I'll be honest with you, I was concerned when Dave Drevna, our previous Choir Director, retired. Who can replace Dave, I thought? Then Stephanie came along. If you were here last Sunday at 11:00 then you heard our choir blow the place up with a lively rendition of "I Go to the Rock" with additional accompaniment of percussionists Stephen Ley and Dave Drevna. In fact, in the six years that I have been here the

choir has not been bigger, and what I am told is that Stephanie really brings it out of people, and makes choir a thing people want to participate in.

Is directing choir, and more importantly inspiring choir, a learned skill or a talent?

Of course the best musicians and directors are useless without talented singers, and we have a rotation of maybe ten or so that cycle through the Saturday singers and another thirteen or so that make up our choir. All of these people reflect God's goodness through the good stewardship of their talents.

Now at least in my mind, having a pleasing voice is a Talent. One could improve it with training and singing lessons and so forth, but if one does not have a pleasing voice or cannot carry a tune, or cannot match middle c if that was the only note being played, no amount of lessons will help.

The same could be said for teachers in our school and in our Sunday School. One may love kids and have a desire to teach and may even have some education and training, but the best teachers have Talent, a true gift of communicating.

And let's look at decorating this church. Kaari Wentz is our Administrator of Communications. She made those seven banners that have been up for the last eight weeks. I might have just used a giant sharpie and wrote the Seven Faith Practices on white paper and been done, but Kaari had a vision to use vibrant colors and stylized print and that made them interesting. She also made the banners that you will see during Advent and the green banners you see all Pentecost and Epiphany. Though she is paid staff here at Zion and we utilize her artsy talent to communicate this Church's mission and ministry, the creation of all those banners is not part of her paid work. It's what she does in service to her Lord and her church.

And when it comes to talent, if I don't mention it one of you surely will, who could deny my amazing talent at the slow jam.

So you see, sometimes the line between Time and Talent is blurred, but I don't think it really matters for the faithful disciple, because the faithful disciples simply says, "Let me do what I can do to reflect God's goodness for the sake of the Gospel and in service to Christ's church."

There are so many of you who use your God-given Talents to prosper God's Kingdom through this church and through other interests and organizations that you participate in, and while you have my thanks, it is really what God expects of you. It is good stewardship of the gifts God has first given you. It is the way you reflect God's goodness.

God gives us all Talents, some more than others. Each disciple's responsibility is to figure out what theirs' is and then find a place to use it to the glory of God and in service to the fellowship.

The apostles are clear about this in the new post-resurrection church. Their writings exhort new converts to the faith to bring what they have as a holy and living sacrifice pleasing to the LORD.

Today is All Saints' Sunday, a day set aside by the church to celebrate the lives of those who have passed in the last year and to thank God for the gift of their lives well-spent among us.

I'm not going to mention them all here, but who can forget:

- Marie Bokesch had a great love of music and art and shared it here at Zion.
- Mary Ann Uhran also loved to sing in the choir and had a fun spirit about her.
- As I understand it, Wesley Gray installed the phone system we still use in the church and school.
- Bill Palomaki carried himself with respect and dignity and treated everyone else with the same, and he didn't have to preach, he lived the life of a disciple.
- Though we did not get to take advantage of her here, in previous church homes Barbara Crowers was energetic and the consummate volunteer prior to relocating here to be closer to her daughter.
- Ida Zell was everybody's granny and always had a hug and a kiss for us. She was always sweet and affirming and encouraging.
- And Nancie Bokesch was the one person we could count on to take on a project and get it done with precision. She cared about people and wanted every detail just right for their occasion.

Not one of these people got paid for what they did for us, and they probably wouldn't have accepted it if payment was offered. They simply did it because they had gifts and talents that they willingly used to reflect God's goodness and serve the LORD and his church.

In the Gospel Reading for today, a scribe tested Jesus' theology. He asked a big question; among all the rules, laws, statues and governances that are listed in scripture, which commandment is the biggest, the most important, the first of all.

Jesus answered with the Shema, the centerpiece of Jewish faith. But he didn't stop there. He continued by saying that while an *all in* commitment to love the LORD God is first and fundamental, loving God is manifest in loving others as much, and in the same way we love ourselves.

The scribe was so impressed with Jesus' answer that he not only said he had answered correctly, but agreed that one cannot love God without loving one's fellow human beings. This is love made manifest, and it is worth more than all the offerings and sacrifices.

So today, on All Saints Weekend, we take time to celebrate the lives of our loved ones who lived faithful lives among us, and who have now begun to reap their eternal rewards. And we do indeed thank God for their testimony of faith, not spoken, but lived out, using whatever gifts and Talents they had to love and serve God by loving and serving us and others; reflecting God's goodness.

And God gives all of us Talents that we are to use to prosper his Kingdom, by serving the fellowship of faith and the community around us so that others can come to know the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It should be enough for us to know that what we are spending our lives giving glory to God and obediently serving him who created us. But isn't it wonderful to have the promises of God expressed in many places in scripture that tell us there is a reward for us for our good stewardship of our Time, Talents, and Treasure, which God gave us in the first place.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

Here is my Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you this week. Would you please pray for your Church, its vitality, and its future in all three aspects of personal stewardship. Pray that the Holy Spirit of the Living God lead you in a godly response to all three, but especially this week, pray for the Spirit's guidance on your Talents. Let the living of your life, your example, be a reflection of God's goodness.

Now next week is the exciting conclusion to our 2019 Stewardship Campaign and we will be focusing in on our use of our Treasure. But we have a problem. Simply due to the schedule of things, we already sent your 2019 commitment card to you and in the accompanying letter we asked you to return it next week. That means we will be contemplating and prayerfully considering our commitments before the campaign is concluded without hearing the installment on Treasure.

I can tell you now, everything about the ministry we do out of Zion got a little more expensive this year. And at the same time we lost some dear members; some by death, some by relocation, some have retired and while I expect that they will remain faithful, they have less to be faithful with. We need each of our member families to prayerfully consider our commitments. I truly want you to consider it your reflection of God's goodness.

Prayer

O Lord our God, you are indeed worthy of our love and praise, and we pray that you send us your Holy Spirit to us so that we continue to grow in love and devotion to you all the days of our lives. And we pray that you would guide us in the good stewardship of our Talents so that we reflect your goodness in all we do. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen