The Gift of Our Talents

By

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First Lesson | Exodus 31:1-6

The Lord spoke to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with a divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge, and every kind of skill, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every kind of craft. Moreover, I have appointed with him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, and I have given skill to all the skillful, so that they may make all that I have commanded you.

Second Lesson | 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Now we command you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from every brother or sister living irresponsibly and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not irresponsible when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right but in order to give you an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.

Sermon

Last Sunday we began a time of reflecting on our privilege as faithful stewards of God's blessings. In anticipation of Commitment Sunday, we considered first how the use of time brings glory to God through prayer and in our presence with others. Next week, just prior to presenting our Commitment Cards for 2027, we will focus on how the offering of our financial resources honors our Creator, too. Today, we ponder the gift that comes in sharing our talents.

The reading from Exodus recalls a brief conversation between God and Moses

about a man otherwise not mentioned in the Bible: "See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with a divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge, and every kind of skill." God goes on to name Bezalel's ability "to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every kind of craft." The Lord speaks of others divinely appointed to help make all that had been commanded, including the ark of the covenant. It's one Biblical source of what we affirm in the Reformed tradition, namely, that every talent we possess comes from God.

Our second lesson is drawn from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. He had visited Thessalonica during one of his missionary journeys and engaged in a brief ministry there before being forced to leave. His work, though, bore fruit as a strong church emerged. In his first letter, Paul encouraged them to remain faithful despite persecution. His second epistle echoes that theme, but our passage today focuses on an issue inside the congregation.

"Now we command you," he writes, "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living irresponsibly and not according to the tradition they received from us... For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work." He then concludes, "Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right."

His words remind me of an assertion that you have probably heard, too, declaring "80% of the work is done by 20% of the people." It doesn't matter if the person using that phrase is speaking about their civic group or youth sports league, book club, or alumni association, as there seems to be an accepted fact that a relatively small number of people make any group function.

Such thinking reflects something called the Pareto Principle. Developed in the 19th century by an Italian economist named Vilfredo Pareto, the idea arose after seeing that 80% of the pea pods in his garden came from 20% of the plants. The principle is widely cited today far beyond agricultural matters. AI reports that 80% of what we do in a typical day comes from 20% of our knowledge, 80% of car accidents are caused by 20% of drivers,

80% of complaints arise from 20% of customers, and so forth. The same norm has been cited in church circles, too.

In his letter, Paul doesn't name the Pareto Principle, of course, but he seems to be articulating the same idea. "We hear that some of you are living irresponsibly," translated in other versions of Scripture as "living in idleness…mere busybodies, not doing any work."

Keep in mind this letter was read aloud during worship. Thus, everyone in the room hears it at the same time—those who are following Paul's example and those who are not. We don't have any Biblical report on the response, but knowing human behavior as we do can easily imagine that those being praised felt the love and offered disapproving looks toward the others. It's also easy to suspect that Paul's words did little to stir many of the uninvolved into a different pattern, as to hear themselves publicly described as "living in idleness, mere busybodies" surely made them angry. His approach, among other things, makes clear that Paul is not the inspiration for the idiom in our day, declaring, "You catch more flies with honey than vinegar!"

Yet despite his tactless way of going about it, Paul wanted more believers to share their talents with the church, as he knew the difference it would make for that congregation and the individual as well. While I don't view persons who are not engaged as busybodies, it has always been a priority in ministry for me, too, to help congregants become more involved.

Ten days ago, I made a list of just a few of the many members at BMPC who actively share their talents here. Some have always been Presbyterian, and others grew up in a different Christian tradition. Some are lifetime members while others joined in the past ten years. To all, I blind copied an email thanking them for their generosity here and seeking help with this sermon. I asked each to share the story of how they first became involved at Bryn Mawr, the difference it has made for them, and any advice they would offer to those who have not yet taken that step or at least not in recent years. Let me share just some of what your fellow members said.

On the question of how they had first taken that step, some respondents had stepped forward on their own, yet others told of being invited. One recalled how, "a

church member… asked whether I would consider joining a medical mission trip to Wanless Hospital in Miraj, India…I replied with at least six reasons why it wasn't practical." He accepted, and the journey was transforming. Another wrote, "Just a few weeks after I joined the church, a member of the New Member Council invited me to join the council. Her spirit of welcome and enthusiasm about the work made saying yes easy…it was the beginning of my involvement at BMPC."

In speaking of the difference in sharing talents, one wrote, "Being introduced to a more progressional theology has been a source of growing my faith, especially reading Scripture through the lens of love." "Being active in the church," said another, "has also helped me understand that faith is not something we live out alone. It is about supporting one another, praying for one another, serving others, and being there through our good and difficult times." "Being a participant instead of an observer has created a great connection to fellow members but also to God," one member wrote. "Acts of service, whether it's teaching Sunday School, ushering, or making casseroles, are an expression of love and a way to glorify God."

Lastly, when it came to encouragement for others, I heard a shared theme. "You don't have to have everything figured out before you get involved," one said, "Just take one step...I can guarantee once you get involved, your connection to God and the church will deepen." "Start small with an activity that is of interest…There are many opportunities to get involved, and you will find that your participation is spiritually enriching and personally satisfying." "It doesn't require any particular skills or profound knowledge of the Bible," one congregant noted. "Those things may come in time, but more importantly you'll be making a tangible connection to the faith community of BMPC." "My advice to someone who has not taken that step, or has not done so in recent years, is to take the chance. We are surrounded by abundance and unaware of how valuable our talents are to the majority of the world that lives with so much less or in desperate poverty. In my experience, one person can have an impact that propagates exponentially."

Not one of those individuals began the sharing of their talents by being elected as a church officer, though all of them eventually served in that capacity. Many

of them recalled a time of wondering if they had anything to offer or being unsure how to start. Yet all of them shared the joy of having taken that first step and the difference it has made for them since.

Thus, as you ponder the "talents" part of your Commitment Card, I encourage you to pray about how you might use your unique gifts in a new way in the year ahead. Certainly, I can't predict the result of such efforts, but a few of the people seated in these pews affirm that it will be a powerful outcome for you and this body of faith.

And those same fellow members would tell you it's a risk worth taking.