

3 May 2020

Talent: Incense and Perfume

Exodus 31:1-6; 30:34-38

This month, in my messages, I'm talking about becoming the Image of God. Yes, I know that Genesis 1:27 says that we human being were already created in God's image and likeness, but it's also fairly clear that that image . . . how can I put this? . . . hasn't entirely *taken*. That is, our first thought upon looking at humanity is not necessarily, "Gee, that's just what God is like." There's been a glitch, and perhaps it was inevitable. You see, it's sort of a Catch-22 for God. Part of being like God is that we were granted free will, the freedom to choose whether we wanted to be like God. And, to one degree or another we have all decided, "Yeah, no." So what I'm exploring this month is the pathway back, ways we can make different choices that, action by action, decision by decision, move us along the way toward becoming the people we were designed to become. Last week I talked about seeing time from God's perspective and making choices for the future's sake, not just for ourselves. Today I want to talk about talent.

First, what we even mean by the word? Well, it has a long and convoluted history. "Talent" was originally a unit of weight, which then became a unit of money (that is, a certain weight of silver), kind of like the English "pound." Then, by means of Jesus' famous parable of the talents – in which different amounts of money are given to different servants, who either use the money or bury it – the word came to refer to any gift that is given to people that they may either develop or ignore. As the old uses – weight and currency – disappeared from use, this became the primary meaning of "talent": human gifts and abilities. But in more recent years, the word "talent" has gotten more restricted. Among the different gifts and abilities that humans have, some of them naturally draw attention to the person who has the talent, while others do not. In our common practice, we tend to use the word "talent" only for the first group, those attention-grabbing gifts. These include anything that might get you on TV (for instance, on "America's Got Talent") or that might make you a house-hold name, and would include such gifts as singing, acting, evading linebackers, dancing, throwing a ball through a metal hoop from a long way away or hitting a smaller ball with a stick consistently, playing a solo instrument, and sometimes for people who can draw or paint or write well. When we say "talent," this is the sort of giftedness we usually mean: something that puts on a good show.

We use different words to describe less dramatic abilities, things like building, cooking, gardening, counseling, teaching, sewing, caregiving, chemistry, or diplomacy. We say that people with those abilities are "skilled" or "competent" or maybe just "good at," but we don't usually talk about talented senior caregivers or chemists, for instance. For the most part we reserve "talented" for abilities that might make you famous someday. If you think about it, it's kind of weird.

And it gets even weirder. In our fascination with fame we have gotten to the point where we shower attention on those who manage to put on a good show even without any other talent. We have people like Zsa Zsa Gabor and the Kardashians and basically anyone who is a "reality" television star, who are famous just for being famous. And then, just in the past ten years or so we've seen the rise of so-called "influencers." These are people whose skill is that of attracting attention to themselves on social media, racking up huge followings on their Instagram accounts

or YouTube channels. They say provocative things or post pictures of themselves in exotic locations. Many of those pictures are faked, but who cares so long as they attract Likes and Shares? Being an influencer was, until a month or so ago, a hot career choice. Wait, how is this a career? Well, advertisers who want to target a certain demographic pay influencers whose followers fit that profile to include some product promotion amid all the self-promotion. I feel as if I need to say, “I’m not making this up.” It sounds like something from a Kurt Vonnegut novel, something that satirizes modern society through grotesque exaggeration. But it’s real. Very weird, but real.

Let’s take a breath, pause for a moment, and ask ourselves a question – How does God think about talents? – while Jennifer plays.

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So here’s where we’ve gone as a culture. First we began to admire dramatic talents over other talents, and now we’ve reached the point where we’re admiring being dramatic in the absence of any talent at all. I hardly think I need to say it, but this is not how the mind of God works. Let’s look at a brief passage from a mostly-unread part of scripture. The second half of the book of Exodus is primarily an account of the building of the Tabernacle and all its furniture and supplies, including measurements and materials. It is . . . deathly dull. We read from that section now: Exodus 31, verses 1-6:

31 The Lord spoke to Moses: ²See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: ³and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge in every kind of craft, ⁴to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, ⁵in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft. ⁶Moreover, 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.

The thing I want to highlight in this reading is how God refers to Bezalel and Oholiab and the workers who will be in charge of the Tabernacle construction: God says of Bezalel, “I have filled him with the Spirit of God.” Some translations change that phrase slightly, but I strongly disagree with those translations. The Hebrew says “filled with the Spirit of God,” using exactly the same words for these craftsmen that are used elsewhere to describe God’s inspiration of judges and prophets and interpreters of dreams and wise rulers. Then God says of Oholiab and the rest of the workers: “I have given skill to *all* the skillful.” God, speaking through scripture, values the talent of the weaver and the jeweler and the carpenter and the metalworker in exactly the same terms as the talents that attract more attention.

This feels true. One of the clarifying perspectives that many have come to in the midst of our pandemic is that during this time of crisis, those people whose talents we have admired (and rewarded) so profusely, have interestingly enough *not* fallen into the category of “essential workers.” You know whose talents I admire now, as measured in how many times I say thank you? That swift, efficient cashier at Festival on Clairmont. Add to that plumbers, nursing home employees, medical professionals, child-care workers who are caring for the children of medical

professionals, teachers, sanitation workers . . . you know the list. It goes on for a long time, but doesn't include quarterbacks or actors or CEOs or influencers.

So the first step in trying to consider talents as God does is to expand our definition of what counts as a talent. To use our own church community as a microcosm, talent includes our musicians, of course, and we are blessed that way, but it also includes those who can organize people into groups – people like Chris Draxler or Linda Keepers or Mary Rose Howard (who got a crew into our sanctuary this week for a deep cleaning). Talent includes people like Bonnie Wright, who can design stunning gardens; Jon Case and Al Fedie who can rewire light fixtures (which, to me, is like witchcraft); Jill Weisenbeck, who can understand and explain finances; Jerry Kroll, who can build anything (and who oversaw the installation of our new Chancel lift this past few weeks); and Bill Wright and Dick Keepers, who can make anyone feel welcome. Now, none of these talents were acquired without work. All represent not only the gift of God but also thousands of hours of study or practice or both, but like the workmen of the Tabernacle, these, and so many others like them, are the talented people who are filled with the Spirit of God.

But there's one more thing to say about talents, the thing that connects us to our larger theme of growing into the Image of God, and for that we turn back to that deathly dull Tabernacle section of Exodus to read about the mixture of spices to be used for incense. Exodus 30, verses 34-38:

³⁴The Lord said to Moses: Take sweet spices, stacte, and onycha, and galbanum, sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), ³⁵and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; ³⁶and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet you; it shall be for you most holy. ³⁷When you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to the Lord. ³⁸Whoever makes any like it to use as perfume shall be cut off from the people.

You saw that? Once something has been dedicated to God, it is holy, and once it is holy, it is no longer for us. There's an important principle here. What has been given to us in terms of our talents, our gifts, becomes holy when it is dedicated to God. In the case of this incense, that means used only in the Tabernacle, not as personal perfume. But in the larger sense – and especially in light of the example of Christ – dedicated to God also means, used for the sake of to our neighbor. Our talents, whatever they may be, even if they are gifts that naturally attract attention, are not for the purpose of self-promotion. They are for the exact opposite purpose, for the service of God, usually through the service of others. And, again, our current crisis has stripped away some of our illusions and made that clear. As a nation and a world we have come to realize that those most deserving of our admiration are those who serve others selflessly. That's when a talent becomes an offering, sweet incense to God. That's when it is holy.

Let us pray:

O Creator God, you who create by nature,
for whom to imagine is to bring into being,
for whom to speak is to transform,

and for whom to sing is to summon the dawn, thank you.
Thank you for loving to create and for instilling in us that same love.

Thank you today for art – the outpouring of that creating impulse.
Thank you for dance, transforming thought and feeling into motion,
for music and song, shaping sound to enlarge the human heart,
for story and verse, imitating your own act of creation by word,
for sculpture and painting, redefining worlds with color and form and line.
Who would we be without art? But with it, we are collaborators in creation.

Thank you today for art – for it is the very imitation of your heart.
Thank you for cooking, the joyous reshaping of this world to delight the palate,
for building with wood and stone and steel, for in this way, we too create worlds,
for sewing and quilting and weaving, and all the magic of reshaping fibers for beauty
and warmth,
for the art of taking things apart and putting them back together, the magic and the
gift of repair,
for the artistry of the scientist, joining you in appreciation of both the impossibly
large and the infinitesimally small.
Who would we be without art? But with it, we are your children.

Thank you today for art – for it is for us, as for you, the very breath of life.
Thank you for the artistry of teachers, who share your delight in transformation of others,
for healing and caregiving, the arts of those who rejoice in unobstructed breathing,
unaided steps, eyes that open after too long, life restored – for this joy first filled your
heart,
for the art of listening and speaking the word of wise counsel and then listening again,
for those who practice these arts know the rhythm of prayer.
Who would we be without art? But with it, we are your very image.

O Creator God, we have beheld you in art, and we have joined you in your studio.
We are your apprentices, your students.
Bravo, Maestro!
Thank you, Master. Amen.