

If you've spent any time hanging around a church, you have surely heard the parable of the talents. A lot of emphasis is placed on the amount of money entrusted to the servants, so you may have heard it during a stewardship campaign, or other similar event. A talent was roughly equivalent to 20 years of wages for the average worker. So, if one had been entrusted with one talent, like the last of the servants, that was about one's economic worth for a life-time. Five talents or even two was unimaginable wealth, and quite a responsibility.

Most of the sermons I've ever heard about this scripture translates 'talents' into abilities we might have – tap dancing or playing volleyball or painting pictures. But that's a kind of prosaic reading of things. What if the issue for us is not our various abilities, but our whole life – which is certainly a gift of God to us. We might put the question as Mary Oliver did in her poem *A Summer Day*: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do; with your one wild and precious life?"

Karoline Lewis, Professor at Luther Seminary, rephrases the question as, "What are you doing with what you have been given? Jesus calls out our squandering of that which has been entrusted to us. Will you sideline or sidestep your public voice? And, will you admit why you are doing so? Are you afraid of rocking the proverbial boat? Afraid of not being liked? Or, are you afraid of the Lord?"

The concept of the fear of the Lord seems quaintly old fashioned. But I believe that the Lord, crucified and risen, asks for our testimony to the presence of God in our lives beyond the corner where we pray quietly by ourselves. Our every breath is called into the service of the coming Kingdom, our being is given in trust for the enactment of God's love.

What are we doing with what we have been given? Among other things the parable says that God is already with us, and trusts us to follow. I don't believe that God asks for incredible

acts of courage, but he does call us to show up. To bury ourselves in a figurative hole in the ground because we are fearful of acting is presented here as a form of faithlessness, liable to judgement.

Lately I find myself thinking a lot about Ruth Bader Ginsburg. This past February, she visited Union Theological Seminary to give the annual Women of Spirit presentation. This honor is given to women who are seen as working out of their faith. It was one of her last public appearances, and the students in the chapel were wild with enthusiasm and admiring applause.

Bill Moyers did the interview. One of the questions he asked was what Ginsburg's role models were when she was growing up in Brooklyn. She answered, "one was real, one was made up, and one was biblical." The real role model was Amelia Earhart, a truly heroic woman. The fictional one was Nancy Drew who solved her own problems without waiting for a boy to show up. And the Biblical figure was Deborah, the judge from the Hebrew Bible, about whom we heard in this morning's readings.

Deborah was one of only four female judges known in scripture. She was a Prophetess, who sat under a palm tree, listening for the words of God, and giving judgements to those who came with problems, helping them remain faithful to their constitution - the Covenant they had with God. It was here she heard God's command that the people of Israel should go into battle to defeat the Canaanites who had oppressed them for twenty years.

She sent for Barak, a man of Naphtali, to gather a force from his tribe, and she presented him with a battle plan. He reluctantly agreed to the task, but only if she would be in the battle also. This brave man apparently needed to have his hand held. Deborah's plan was good, the battle was won by Israel and the Canaanites fled.

If you go beyond the reading you heard this morning, you will come to the Song Deborah, who was also a gifted poet. She spent her life serving God and the people with courage and fidelity. Yes, a good role model, and one that the justice obviously took seriously.

If God asked RBG what she had done with her life, she would answer, I think, that she put much of her energy into the work of establishing equality for women. Before she became a justice, she argued before the Supreme Court for the rights of women in America. She was a brilliant strategist, bringing the case not of a woman, but of a man who was not allowed to collect on his deceased wife's Social Security, because men were deemed not to need this. When she won that case, she had demonstrated that gender had nothing to do with government benefits. She had begun the process of opening the door for women to have equal access to rights and privileges.

When she appeared at a local synagogue 3 years before her death, she came on stage carrying a tote bag which said, "I Dissent". Inside, there was a diary entry by German Holocaust victim Anne Frank pondering why women are thought inferior to men. The tiny 84-year-old jurist said America still needs to make equality explicit.

And perhaps her last great service to all of us was her persistence on the court through several diagnoses of cancer. Two years ago she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer which she fought off for as long as she could, through surgery and chemotherapy. She said that she would remain on the court as long as she could physically serve, which I think entailed a fair amount of suffering. I believe she wanted to remain a justice until after this past election, although that ultimately was not possible.

Now if God asks her for an accounting of her stewardship of life, there was no burying herself in a hole. The life of God in her

was filled with the tireless use of all her abilities to fulfill the words
on the plaque in her office

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Tsedek Tsedek Tirdof which means 'Justice, Justice you shall
pursue'.

I would not be ashamed to stand before God and give
that answer. May we all respond to God out of our best life and
deep love.