

“LET’S GO TO THE MOVIES:
II – ‘RUN, FORREST, RUN!’”
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July 14, 2019

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 5:13-15

A few weeks ago, I had my yearly supervisory meeting with the District Superintendent – in other words, my evaluation. Prior to that meeting every year, each pastor is required to fill out about a 10 page questionnaire. The questions we have to answer are all over the map, from whether or not we completed the required continuing education we’re supposed to do, to what are our biggest joys and biggest frustration in our ministries. And then, there is a question asking us to identify our greatest gifts.

Now, I don’t know about you, but sometimes I find doing that awkward. I mean, we’re taught somewhere along the way, to be humble and not prideful, not to talk about ourselves or boast about ourselves. So, is it okay to say that you think preaching is your gift, or not? Is it okay to say you’re a great organizer, or not? It’s a little awkward, don’t you think?

Yet, all of us are gifted, in one way or another. All of us have been endowed with gifts from our Creator God – all of us. The key is to identify what they are and use them for the kingdom.

That’s not always so easy, by the way. Far too often, we either think there’s nothing particularly special about us, or we focus on the things we don’t like about ourselves, or things we can’t do.

Well, there was a perfectly delightful film that came out a number of years ago about a guy who society had pegged as “different” and it was called “Forrest Gump.” I’m sure many of you saw it, and remember it well. Tom Hanks played Forrest, and the movie spans the years from Forrest’s birth to adulthood, and all the amazing things that happened to him.

What’s amazing is that anything amazing happened, considering the way Forrest started out his life. Forrest was deemed “different” by the world around him. He walked differently (he had braces on his legs), he talked differently, he thought differently, his home life was different (there was no dad at home), he learned differently from other children. The world called Forrest Gump “different,” and treated him that way – with the exception of two people – his sweet mother and Shis little friend Jenny.

Had you asked Forrest Gump early on what gifts he had, I don't know that he would have had an answer for that. I'm sure, given the way he was treated, he might have questioned that he had any gifts.

Until one day – something happened. Some of those people who thought him different, kids his own age started something, and they had no earthly idea how it would end. Take a look.

(Clip from Forrest Gump where he's being chased by mean kids and he discovers he can run!)

Forrest had been put in a box by so many people, told in so many ways all the things he couldn't do, that, until his back was up against the wall, he didn't realize he had a gift of running. And as he said, all the rest of his life he ran like the wind!

Was that a gift? Most assuredly, it was. He ran so fast, they put him on the University of Alabama football team. He ran with strength, so that when his dearest friend in the Army, Bubba, was gravely wounded, he picked Bubba up and carried him out of harm's way.

And it seems that once Forrest discovered this one gift in his life, it opened up doors to discover others, so that indeed, he was different all right, but different in a wonderful, loving way – in a way that made a mark on the world.

Luckily, most of us don't have to fight the battle Forrest Gump did to discover our gifts. Most of us are not the butt of jokes by others, most of us haven't been labeled different. Nonetheless, it's up to each one of us to discover what the gifts are that God has given us, and to use them for his glory, and not hide them under a bushel basket as we're told in this morning's Gospel lesson.

You know, sometimes I think when we talk about gifts in church, we make them bigger than they are. When we talk about gifts, I think our minds turn to the big gifts we see in scripture – healing and prophecy and evangelism – things of that nature. But remember what we heard in Romans – there are all kinds of gifts – and all of them are of value.

I daresay few of us would count “running” as a huge gift, yet running was an incredible gift through which Forrest Gump touched people. You see what I mean? All gifts are valuable, and should not be ranked in importance. Your gifts are your gifts, and what matters is not what the world thinks of them, but how you use them for and with God. What you think is a simple, perhaps insignificant gift could profoundly touch someone else.

Look through the Gospels, and you'll see Jesus affirming all sorts of gifts – big and little. He had the ability to invite people to use whatever gifts God had given them. So, he invited the fisherman to fish for people for the kingdom. He invited people like Martha to use her culinary skills to feed others. He asked that little boy to share his sack lunch so that others could eat. He invited people to go out and tell their stories of faith to others – just simply talking.

You see, for Jesus, all gifts mattered then, and they matter now. Whether you count them as big or small, all gifts count, and we're called to use them however we can.

I think I might have told some of you years ago, how way back in my life, before I had even thought about ministry, I worked as a secretary at the University of Delaware for five years or so. For a few of those years, I worked in a little office on Academy Street in Residence Life. There were two of us working as secretaries in that little office, me and a young woman named Debbie.

Debbie and I were pretty different. Though we both grew up in households with a lot of kids and where faith was a big part of our life, our families were very different. One day Debbie mentioned that she hadn't read a book since she left high school. I couldn't imagine such a thing, and I had just finished reading "The Thorn Birds," which I absolutely loved. Debbie took a look at that big book sitting near my purse and sort of rolled her eyes. Yet, when I told her it was set in Australia, her mother's home country, and I urged her to try it, she reluctantly took it home. Weeks later, she came to me, almost with tears in her eyes, thanking me for encouraging her to read it.

Now, if someone had asked me back then to list my gifts, reading probably wouldn't have been on the list. I guess I never really thought of it as a gift. But I guess it was, and is. Who would have thought that my love of reading, my gift for reading, could touch someone's life? God did.

Another day, we had the radio on in the office, and I was singing along with a song, only I was singing harmony. Debbie looked at me incredulously and said, "How did you do that?" I told her that's what happens when you have a father who's a music teacher, you learn how to sing and play music. She confessed to me then that, except for school programs, she had never attended a concert in her life. I couldn't believe it, having been to more concerts than I could ever count by that time in my life. And she confessed too, that she couldn't sing at all, and that it made her sad – to which I responded, "Everybody can sing!"

So you know what? I taught Debbie to sing through the radio. We would sing along with songs, and I'd help her to hear the harmony line and sing it. Pretty soon, she was really enjoying it, and then, lo and behold, she joined a choir. And

then, later on, she joined the Sweet Adelines, which is all women, and very strong on harmony. And later still, she became a leader in the Sweet Adelines!

Is being able to sing a huge gift? Maybe, maybe not. But when I shared it, it became huge, didn't it?

What is your gift, or what are your gifts? You have them. Have you figured out what they are? If you haven't, well, consider what things you do well naturally or what things bring you joy. Those are gifts from God. Now, think about how you can use them with others and for the sake of the kingdom.

But if you already know what your gifts are, then the question is: are you using them to help others and give glory to God? And if not, why not? Don't make it harder than it is.

The late professor and writer Leo Buscaglia once told about a student of his named Joel who came to him feeling depressed. He felt like there was nothing going right in his life and he felt pretty worthless. So Leo invited him to take a walk with him, and he walked Joel over to a nearby retirement village. Confronted with elderly people sitting in wheelchairs in a hallway, and others wandering around, Joel looked at Leo and asked why they were there. He wasn't studying gerontology.

Leo ignored him, and said, "You know what? See that woman in the wheelchair over by the window, just go over and say hello to her."

"That's all?" Joel replied.

"Yep, just go over and say hello."

So Joel shuffled over there and said hello to the woman, who looked back at him suspiciously. "Are you a relative?" she asked. "No," he said, to which she replied, "Good. Sit down."

So he sat down and they started to talk. And of that moment, Leo Buscaglia wrote: "Oh, the things she told him! This woman knew so much about love, pain, suffering. Even about approaching death, with which she had to make some kind of peace. But no one had cared about listening – until Joel."

After that, Joel started going over there once a week. He became a regular, so much so that the staff called the day he visited "Joel Day."

Leo Buscaglia said that the greatest day in his teaching career was when he was walking across campus one Saturday afternoon, and there was Joel, like the Pied Piper, with thirty older adults stretched out behind him, making their way to the Coliseum to see a football game! (James W. Moore, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture Is On It*, “Celebrating God’s Key to Real Life,” p. 62)

Discovering his gifts of care, compassion and conversation literally changed Joel’s life and touched countless others. Would someone have called those gifts huge – perhaps not on the face of them – but oh, how huge they were in the lives of so many!

Let me ask you something: Have you ever picked out a gift for someone in your life and given it to them, only to never, ever see it again? Makes you wonder if they didn’t like it, or stuck it away somewhere, or even re-gifted it, doesn’t it?

Now, imagine how God feels with the gifts he’s given us, if he never sees them again, never sees us use them.

Or, on the reverse side, imagine the joy it gives God, to see us realize the gifts we have, and use them for him and others!

Writer Kaye Ramos challenges us with these words: “Every human being conceived carries with him or her the innate ability that is uniquely his or hers. It is like our fingerprint. Lots of people may carry the same ability, but the way we use ours will make us unique. These talents, gifts or strengths are our diamonds. We need to dig them. Nobody can dig them for us. Once we find them, we should remove the dust. Keep polishing them. The more we take care of them, the more we can recognize the other diamonds in our lives. Soon, our gifts and talents, just like diamonds, will shine brightly and will serve us well in the long run. Because we took the time to search for them, the return of investment is more than what we have imagined. Because our Creator saw that we are using them, he will bless us with more opportunities to apply them.”

And she finishes with this: “Make a promise to yourself. You’ll search for your diamonds. And you’ll make sure they will shine brightly.” (On-line, Kaye Ramos, “7 Inspiring Reasons Why You Should Use Your Talents or Gifts,” 8/16/17)

My friends, search for your diamonds. They’re there, waiting to be discovered, to be polished, and to shine brightly in service to God and others. May it be so.

Amen.