

It's What You Do With What You've Got

Let us pray: May your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path; through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Amen.

Towards the end of Matthew's Gospel, in Chapter 25, we have three parables in a row, without a break. Parables, like stories, transcend any one meaning and vary according to the settings in which they are heard. Today's parable, often referred to as the Parable of the Talents, speaks to me about faithful stewardship. I know very well that when we use the word, stewardship, in the church, more often than not we're talking about money. Yet, even though this parable mentions money and investments, isn't really not about money at all.

The kind of stewardship that this parable speaks to has more to do with the various gifts that we've been blessed with: talents, skills, and abilities. As St. Paul put it to the Corinthian congregation: "There are a variety of gifts but the same Spirit" (1 Cor 12:4)

Everything we have is given to us by God, we could even say, on loan to us by God. We serve the Lord out of love and gratitude for the blessings constantly poured out for our benefit. Are there people who have more than we do? Yes, of course. But there are plenty who have a lot less too. Are there folks who have more gifts and abilities? Sure there are. One of the givens of the parable is that not all of us have the same measure of gifts or abilities. Again as the Apostle Paul once put it, "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rom 12:6).

But in the final analysis, that doesn't matter. What matters is not how much we have to start with, but what we do or don't do with what we have. In 1 Peter 4:10 it states, "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received."

Stewardship is personal! Contemplate the gift of life itself-the greatest gift of all. As Christians we know that our lives are sacred trusts. St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, once sat down, as a young man, and attempted to draw up an inventory of what he felt he owed to God, hoping to awaken within himself a greater sense of gratitude. But his list never got beyond the first item. At the top of the page he simply wrote down- myself!

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He sat there mesmerized by that word, overwhelmed by the realization that “I am a gift of God to me” and all that implied. It instilled in him a renewed reverence for the gift of life itself.

Today’s parable is primarily about the stewardship of our lives! Our lives are God’s gift to us; what we do with our lives is our gift to God and one another. One thing this means is that our lives, as gifts, are meant to be spent; not just for ourselves of course but for the reign of God. It also is about the stewardship of the people of God and our mutual calling to be Christ’s body in our neck of the woods.

Again, as Paul expresses this “To each is given a manifestation of the Spirit **for the common good**” (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Maybe you’ve heard of the Grimke sisters of South Carolina? They were courageous anti-slavery activists as well as leaders in the early women’s suffrage movement. They were raised of course to be cultured, but also politically uninvolved Southern, upper-class belles.

However, a great change came about in Angelina Grimke’s life when she heard this parable of Jesus read in church one Sunday morning. She went home right after church and sat in her chair thinking to herself, over and over again, “What have you done, Angelina, with the talents committed to your care?” That question led to a dramatic change in her life, a personal change which contributed to a major change in the entire nation as she became involved in the abolitionist movement.

Prior to that involvement, her parents had given her a black girl to be her slave. Angelina, considering the girl to be her equal from the start, taught her how to read, even though it was against the laws of her state at that time. That’s because she knew she served a God of love and love supplants unjust man-made laws.

One interesting aspect of this parable Jesus told is that the three servants are not given equal portions to start out with. Notice that they were each given an amount to manage ‘according to their ability’. The word translated ‘ability’ is ‘dynamis’ which means to a ‘power’

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or 'potentiality'. When Robert Louis Stevenson was a young man, he wrote, "There is something within me worth saying, though I can't find what it is just yet".

His words revealed an inner potentiality for writing- a gift. How grateful the world is, that Stevenson realized the full potential of his gift!

To give you a more recent example: Alex Trebek. We all have come to know him and appreciate him as the talented host of the game show "Jeopardy". One of his greatest gifts was, in his own words, the ability to "provide an atmosphere and assistance to the contestants to get them to perform at their very best" (BDN, B4, 11-9-20)

There is a folk song that has helped me understand one important meaning of this ancient parable. It was written and composed by Joe Hill in the 80's. I first heard it sung by Gordon Bok and some of his friends. It goes like this:

"It's not just what you're born with, it's what you choose to bear'

It's not how large your share is, but how much you can share.

And it's not the fights you dream of, but those you've really fought.

It's not just what you're given, but what you do with what you've got".

Clarence Jordan once said that a parable is like a Trojan Horse.

Once you let it in, bam, it's got you!

That's true especially with the parable of the talents. When it comes right down to it, the parable is about making full use of our various gifts and talents to further God's will in the world.

It's about trust. It begins with an act of trust. Before going on a journey, the Master entrusts talents to each of his servants. Five to the first one; two to the second; and one to the third. But it's also about the servant's trust in the Master.

The parable asks of us: How do we see God?

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Are we willing to put our trust in God, who is generous, gracious, and life-giving; who loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love; who created us in the divine image, which means each one of us has a great deal to offer. After all, even the one talent in the parable, had an incredible amount of value!

If the first two servants can trust their earthly Master, how much more can we trust God revealed in Christ, who accepts our offerings, not according to the greatness of the deeds themselves, but according to the love with which they are done.

As St. John of the cross once wrote:

“In the evening of life, we will be judged by love alone”.