

Sermon
November 13, 2011

Sisters and brothers: The Parable of the Talents is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. There are differences in details, but it is substantially the same material.

Some of you know that Matthew and Luke rely heavily on Mark's Gospel for the basic outline of their Gospels. But, Matthew and Luke had access to a collection of the sayings of Jesus which they inserted into Mark's outline. It is designated as the "Q" source from the German word for "sayings" which is "quelle." You don't need to know that, but I learned it in seminary and once in a while you should be assured that I did get an education and have remembered some of it. I also learned the word, "urgeschichte." It is a German word which means "pre-history" and refers to the first 11 chapters of Genesis. That is absolutely irrelevant for today's sermon, but I love saying the word. "Urgeschichte." A German phrase I know is, "Machen sie die mut zu" which roughly translated means, "shut up." I will as

concerns my erudition before your eyes glaze over and your brain freezes.

The Parable of the Talents begins with the Master entrusting three slaves with huge amounts of money that they are to manage while he is gone on a long journey. The numbers are staggering. Many millions of US dollars.

Each slave is given a different amount based on the Master's assessment of the individual's ability. Five talents. Two talents. One talent.

The Master returns after a time and demands an accounting. The two slaves with the most entrusted to them report that they have done well. Each has doubled the Master's money. The third slave cites the Master's reputation for business acumen, and admits that he did no more than bury the money in the ground where it would be safe until the Master returned.

The first two are rewarded with compliments and the chance to do more. The third is strongly rebuked and thrown out on his ear. The phrase "weeping and gnashing of teeth" is a usual one in

the Gospels for people who do or should have regrets. You probably were weeping and gnashing your teeth over the earlier German lesson.

We should hear the story as Jesus' Word that we have been entrusted with immense riches and graces based on God's high regard for us and God's notion of our abilities. Those treasures can be doubled as we use the "talents" that have been entrusted to us. A sometime friend of mine suggested that the parable was a mirror for me. He said, "Dick, you are a one talent man, and should bury that talent in the ground." Again, I digress, and I don't own a shovel.

The "talents" in the parable are best understood as "opportunities." Opportunities to enhance and expand God's reach in the world.

Today I pulled together a primer on opportunities. Ways you can use encounters in your lives to benefit God and the people.

Sometimes the street corner evangelist asks, “Do you believe in God?” That is an opportunity to say, “Yes, I do. But, do you know a more important thing? God believes in you.”

The Church has its share of critics. “All the Church wants is my money.” I am inclined to use this opportunity to say, “You are right. The Church does want your money so it can be funneled to the poor who are among us. The needs are great.”

Then, there is the person who claims, “I can be spiritual without going to Church.” That is an opportunity to say, “No doubt. But, every spiritual gift needs to be shared with others and nurtured by others, so the gift blossoms and flourishes.”

Some people will tell you they don’t like organized religion. That is a great opportunity to say, “Come to Shepherd of the Hills. We have been trying to get organized for 20 years and haven’t made it yet. You will fit right in.”

“You are just a bunch of hypocrites.” Heard that one? It is an opportunity to say, “Of course we are. We all know more about God’s will than we are able or willing to do which is baseline

hypocritical. But, like the stars we will never reach, we can be guided by God's will as earlier sailors navigated by God's stars."

There is an opportunity when someone says, "The Church never changes." Tell them, "Not true. We change a lot. We change light bulbs. We change peoples' lives. We change attitudes toward the marginalized. Come and help us continue to make necessary changes."

"I don't believe in God." That is an opportunity. Ask the person to tell you about the God they do not believe in. They may be surprised to learn you don't believe in that kind of God either.

A tragedy strikes and some well meaning person rushes in to speak when they should be silent. "This is God's will." A friend taught me to use that as an opportunity to say, "I don't find it helpful to think about God that way. In every tragedy God's heart is the first to break, but God comes especially close in tragic circumstances."

There is an opportunity when a critic says, "The Church has done terrible things." The best response is to agree. "Yes, the

Church has done terrible things, but we are learning. Come and join us so we learn more and join us in insuring that bad things are no longer done.”

Profanity. There are those who heedlessly use God’s Name for other than prayer or praise. When you are with those folks it is an opportunity. Tell them gently and kindly, “God’s Name is important to me. Would you be willing to respect God and me by being careful with God’s Name?”

“I feel close to God on the golf course.” As a person with a 3 handicap I know that golf courses are places of prayer. But, this can be an opportunity to say, “God is close to you on the golf course, but God comes even closer at worship. Join us for that encounter with God.” About my 3 handicap: the 3 handicaps are my woods, irons, and putter.

In a place as glorious as the northwest there are always those who will tell you, “Mountains are my cathedrals.” That is an opportunity to affirm their insight, “I agree. The Creation is a powerful and beautiful witness to God. In addition God comes

close in Word and Sacrament, and in those moments God will open the eyes of your heart to even more majestic vistas.”

Some criticize the Church for hating Gay and Lesbian persons. That is an opportunity to say, “Not our Church. We believe that every person is welcome by God and the Church is learning how to extend that welcome to the sisters and brothers of all sexual orientations.”

Humble folks have been heard to say, “I am not good enough to go to Church.” There is your opportunity to say, “Neither am I. But, the marvelous truth is that God is good enough and welcomes all of each of us with graciousness, forgiveness, and renewal. Come and join us.”

Insightful folks occasionally say, “The preaching is so awful.” Do not argue, but use the comment as an opportunity to say, “That is often true, but even a blind squirrel gets an acorn once in a while. Come with me next Sunday. Maybe the preacher and you will get lucky.”

“I had a bad experience in Church when I was young.”

Likely true, but it is an opportunity for you to say, “You probably had a bad experience in school when you were young, too, but it didn’t keep you from getting an education. Move beyond that childhood moment and into the arms of a God who loves children – of all ages.”

There is always an opportunity when people say, “I don’t know enough about the Bible to come to Church.” Tell them, “Neither do I, but join us and we can learn together.”

A few folks who have moved beyond the piety of another time will say, “I like to smoke and drink wine and play the penny slots at a casino – you don’t want me in Church.” That is an opportunity to tell them, “So does our Pastor. Join us. The Pastor will be glad for the company.”

Have you heard the people who say, “There are all kinds of religions. What makes Christianity the right one?” Take the opportunity to tell them, “I can’t answer that question for

everyone. I can only say that Christianity is the right religion for me.”

In a chaotic and demanding world there are always those who say, “Sunday is my day to rest.” That is an opportunity to invite them to come here and rest. Tell them what Jesus said: “come unto me all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” If they are not convinced by Jesus’ Word tell them they call always sleep during the sermon. The Pastor will understand.

Prayer can be an impediment for some. “I don’t know how to pray.” That is an opportunity to tell them it’s alright not to know. Encourage them to start simply: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your Name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial. Deliver us from evil. For the Kingdom, the power, the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.”

Opportunities. They are as alive and well as God and you are alive and well. Take the risk and use those opportunities to double up the graces with which you have been entrusted. God has confidence in you. And then wait patiently for the Master to come and ask for an accounting. When you report what you have done you will hear the sweetest words of the Word, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your Master.”

R. L. Christensen
Pastor