

Use it or Lose it

One might wonder if Jesus, as a story teller in our gospel reading today, is well enough informed to be an economic commentator. One might even wonder if the bible in general, and this story in particular, has anything to say about our economic situation today.

However, our gospel reading this morning is about what could happen with what we have been given; as you have heard in the gospel reading this morning a business person was about to go on a trip. Before leaving he calls to him 3 of his most trusted employees. To the top employee he gives five talents = \$100.00 dollars which would normally take 100 years to earn, to the next employee he gives two talents – \$40.00 which would normally take 40 years to earn, and then to the last top employee he gives one talent - \$20.00 which would normally take 20 years to earn. So needless to say the owner of this company was a person of wealth, power and privilege. The owner gave each employee enough money to cover whatever may come up in their area of responsibility until he returned. So, the employees were left to their own devices with what was given to them.

Jesus' story about a businessman who leaves town and entrusts his money with his workers made perfect sense to his audience. Wealthy merchants and business people often had to travel abroad and leave the business to others to handle while they were gone.

However, the focal point of the story seems to fall to the employee who buried the owners' money and produced nothing. In the area of production, as a farmer boy growing up in Alabama, I have planted seeds in the ground and expect them to become productive because they obey the laws of nature. I have benefited from planting seeds of corns, black eye peas, butter beans, squash, baby lima beans, and okra and the task of planting those seeds resulted in wonderful and bountiful meals. This is a result of those efforts. Cause and effect. Effort and result.

However, planting coins or burying our talents does not obey the natural law of growth or reproduction. The employees of our story represent us in relationship with the Divine. We are expected to be productive with what we have been blessed with. God entrusts us with gifts and grace and gives us the freedom to use what we have been given as we think best. We won't all make the same choices, but we are each expected to do something for the good of our world. We've been trusted with energy, intelligence, compassion, and skills and we are meant to share these gifts for the common good.

This parable speaks first of the businessman's trust in his trusted employees. While he goes away he leaves them with his money to use as they think best. While there were no strings attached, this may or may not have been a test to see if the workers would be industrious and reliable in their use of the money entrusted to them. Upon his return, the business man rewards those who are industrious and faithful and he punishes those who sit by idly and who do nothing with his money.

The essence of the parable seems to lie in the servants' conception of responsibility. Each employee was entrusted with money and was faithful up to a point. We might see this as a story of a boss expecting too much and being too harsh. Or we might see this as a story lifting up those who use their gifts to benefit others and shaming those who don't do much for others. We might see this story as a model for stewardship, showing that the more we give to Godly work the more good is accomplished. But regardless of which view we take of the story, it will always boil down to responsibility. In every reading of the story, those who have gifts are responsible for using them in ways that generate more good.

On the surface this parable may solely appear to be about money and what one does or does not do with it. But what if we were to interpret this parable today to mean and represent more than just a financial lesson? What if it were about lessons in life, lessons on receiving and giving; what happens when one does or does not use their talents, their gifts, what happens when one fails to seize the opportunity that has been presented to them. What might happen to churches or congregations if they fail to rise to their full potential of being places and agents of change?

However one might identify with the parable this morning, I hope that we won't fixate on the thought that unless I give enough, and you get to fill in the blank of what the enough might be, that God will not bless me. One of the things that I've learned in my life is that attempting to bargain with God is futile. God is going to be God without my attempts at bargaining to get a better deal or a better blessing. What sheds light on this scripture today is the realization that we are called, we are encouraged to be good stewards of what we have been given by using our resources in a way that benefits all people, and especially those who have been injured, left out or marginalized. Recently it would seem that our margins continue to contract and expand so as to define who's in and who's out. There seems to be a need to continue to define whose relationships are legitimate and whose are not. Who is a true American and who is not? Who gets to receive communion and who does not. Who gets to celebrate their love and who does not.

Regardless of boundaries and other barriers, God can be represented in our passage reading today as someone who makes an intentional investment in us by giving us the ability to love, to long for justice, to respond with compassion, to offer reconciliation, to learn from our mistakes and do better each time. God has trusted us with divine qualities and we are meant to use those gifts to bring honor to the God of goodness and to bless all of God's children. We've been given enormous potential. Do we sit on that potential, or do we use it? The more we use it, especially as we use it to bless our world, the more potential we seem to have. That's how divine economics always works.

As one commentary put it, "God's business is neither capitalist, communist, nor anything in between. God is in the business of loving people, valuing them, including them, providing for them, and growing them. God's investment in us is meant to be two-way traffic, not a one-way fast lane of self-interest."

If that is the case, then I wonder today:

- What would have happened if George Washington had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Abraham Lincoln had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Albert Einstein had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Alexander Graham Bell had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Eleanor Roosevelt had buried her talents?
- What would have happened if John F. Kennedy had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Neil Armstrong had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Ghandi had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Rosa Park had buried her talents?
- What would have happened if Ann Frank had buried her talents?
- What would have happened if Billy Jean King & Wilma Rudolph had buried theirs?
- What would have happened if Rev. Dr. Troy Perry had buried his talents?
- What would have happened if Nelson Mandela had buried his talent?
- What would have happened if Sally K. Ride had not used her talent?
- What would have happened if Ellen Ocha had not used her talent?

Luckily, what we do know is what DID happen because these ordinary human beings chose to tap into their divine potential and share it with the world!

I shuttered to think what would happen to Sunshine Cathedral if we buried our collective talent. Because I believe that if we refuse to allow our talents to be buried, that is, if we refuse to be less than we are capable of being, we will continue to find ourselves becoming a congregation that reaches out with the good news of God's love for all people...and I believe people need that message whether they have never heard it before or if they have heard it a thousand times before. The message of God's love for all is a message we must share with our lives, and we do so as we allow ourselves to be all that we possibly can be.

We have been entrusted as a congregation to continue to use our gifts and talents to reach out and continue to confront poverty, sexism, racism and homophobia through Christian social action.

We have been entrusted to continue to make this a place a house of prayer for all people.

We have been entrusted to be a place of hope for those living with HIV/AIDS and other life threatening illnesses.

We have been entrusted to be a beacon of hope beyond our city and state and country and hemisphere.

You have been entrusted with the gifts of God! Now what you do with those gifts are up to you.

