

“The Master’s Gifts”

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one” (Matthew 25:14-15).

Last month, Vicar Greg and I attended the Indiana District Pastor’s Conference. President May had asked me to come to the conference and participate in a panel discussion about ministry in an urban setting. The panel included pastors from Louisville, Indianapolis and Gary and as our presentation began, each of the pastors gave a brief description of his congregation. As I listened to these three pastors talk, I heard stories of incredible challenge. To varying degrees, all three described congregations with very few resources and staggering needs. One told of a congregation in which very few members had jobs. Another talked about struggling to raise enough money to pay the church’s electric bill and all three of them described surrounding communities lacking some the most basic services and filled with poverty, drug activity, violence and despair.

I was the last one to speak. And as all of the eyes in the room turned toward me I was almost embarrassed to describe a thriving congregation in the heart the city with a growing membership and a church and school filled with talented staff and committed lay leaders. The contrast was jarring, and as the panel discussion continued, my thoughts vacillated between gratitude, pride and even a little guilt as I considered the burden these faithful, beleaguered pastors were bearing. In the midst of these thoughts, today’s parable came flooding into my mind.

In this text, Jesus tells a story about the talents given by the master and the way in which his servants steward the master’s gifts. Today, as we consider this parable and its application to our lives and ministry, we need to recognize the undeniable reality that the Lord has showered an abundance of gifts on this congregation. For nearly 150 years, solely and strictly by His grace, God has planted, He has watered and He has nurtured this church for His purposes. In recent years, the Lord has allowed Emmanuel to expand our campus and He has called many new faces into this fellowship. As we consider these blessings we need to understand that we continue to exist only because of God’s provision for this ministry and in this season of growth and time of plenty we also need to recognize that we are in a dangerous place. That statement may sound crazy coming from me, but as we gear up for a capital campaign designed to fund the development of our campus and repair and restore our Sanctuary, there is a great temptation to lose sight of what God has given and why this time of increase is happening.

My experience at the pastor’s conference last month challenged me in many ways and since the panel discussion, I’ve been thinking about the words of Jesus from Luke’s Gospel when He told His disciples, “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48). My friends, we have been given much and the question before us at such a time as this is a question about how we will use the gifts of the master.

And with this question in mind, the project that stands in front of us cannot be about simply restoring a beautiful building or developing our property or even improving our neighborhood. The Lord has blessed this congregation for one purpose and one purpose only and that is to manage the gifts He has given us for His saving purpose and the bottom line is this: If this or any project we take on is not about proclaiming the forgiving, saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, then we are wasting our time and energy and more importantly we are burying the gifts of our master. This congregation has existed “thus far” to proclaim to every sinner who comes through our doors – and that’s a group that includes all of us – that our sin is real and that our need is great...and that in Jesus Christ our need has been met; that in Jesus Christ, our sins have been forgiven; that in Jesus Christ we have the promise of eternal life.

This is the message the Holy Spirit uses to create faith, this is the message the Holy Spirit uses to save souls, and today this sanctuary is filled with stories of how the Holy Spirit has changed lives through this message. One of those stories comes from Barb Myers. A few weeks ago, I asked Barb to consider how God has touched her life through this congregation and she responded to this request by writing a moving reflection about her experience at Emmanuel. I won't read the entire piece but I want you to hear a few of the thoughts she shared. Barb wrote, "In 1941, at age four, I was enrolled in first grade at a neighborhood public school, not because I was a child prodigy or even a gifted child, but because I was big for my age." She continued by describing an experience that occurred on one of the last days of the school year in which she was walking home from school when some of the older kids she was with decided to insult another group of older kids. She was too young to understand the insults being exchanged and so when her group finally turned and ran from the conflict she simply stood there and was left all alone to face the opposing group who ended up hanging this little, four-year-old girl from a tree limb. She concluded that portion of her memoir by saying, "but thanks be to God He had other plans for me."

Because of this experience, Barb's family decided that the neighborhood public school would no longer be an option for their daughter, and as Barb described it, "Although my parents were un-churched and remained so...the following September, now at age five, I was enrolled in the first grade AGAIN at Emmanuel Lutheran School. I didn't matter that I had already passed first grade and had already learned that Dick and Jane were to run and Spot was to jump. It was the age factor this time. However, (at Emmanuel) one extremely important event in my life took place...I was introduced to Jesus and my young life would be forever changed." Barb then went on to talk about her childhood memories of the sanctuary and the worship services and all of the changes she's seen over the years and at the end of her reflections she made this statement: "one thing know for certain, in the midst of any and all changes, God is always at the forefront, coming to us in His Word, Sacraments and continued blessings. I thank God for our forefathers' faith, dedication and vision for future generations...There is something special about this place."

This place IS special, because in this place the Good News of Jesus Christ is present. That is why Emmanuel is here and any gift that God sees fit to bestow on this body of believers is to be used for this purpose. We gather in this historic sanctuary for the same reasons that people from Emmanuel have gathered here since 1867, and it all starts with Jesus. He is the Master's greatest gift and in "The Parable of the Talents" Jesus gives us a picture of what our lives look like as redeemed people. In this well-known parable, the Master entrusts his talents to three servants, charging them to manage them well upon his absence. To the first, He gives five talents, to the second He gives two and to the third servant the Master gives one talent. When He returns, the Master calls on the servants to give an account of their stewardship. After the first two servants report on how the talents of the Master were multiplied He commends each of them saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" Then, when the third servant reports that, fearful of judgment, He had buried the Master's talent, the Master erupts, stripping the servant of the little he had and casting him into the darkness.

Jesus didn't tell this story to show a temperamental and unpredictable Master. He told this parable to highlight the stark contrast between a fear-driven existence based on our efforts and faith-guided life based on the gifts of the Master, and what we see here informs us that a life in Christ is a life that can risk for the Kingdom and a life that responds to God by using the gifts that He has freely given, not out of fear and uncertainty, but in the confidence that we are loved by God, forgiven through Christ and freed to use His gifts for His purposes.

Outside of Christ, we are always paralyzed with fear. Outside of Christ, we are always under judgment. But in Jesus Christ, God's wrath has been satisfied and we have been liberated from sin and we have been freed to serve – freed to use the talents God has given us; freed to be the people Christ died to make us. And in Christ, the Master calls us "good and faithful servants" as we carry out His work in the world... "Thus Far..." and forever. That is why this is a special place. Amen.

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