

Year A, November 19, 2017
24 Pentecost (Proper 28)
Christ Church, Mexia

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well."

Today's gospel reading continues immediately after last week's, and so the parable of the talents really continues the discussion we started last week. First, I should mention that a talent was not a coin in the 1st Century, but a weight. Its value would depend upon the metal of which the talent was made. A silver talent would represent about 15 years of wages for the average worker in those days. So Jesus was using an example that would catch people's attention – something people would consider valuable. Thus, not using the talent for God's betterment can easily be seen as a problem. But it goes much deeper than that. According to Barclay, "Jesus tells us that there can be no religion without adventure, and that God can find no use for the shut mind."

Many Biblical scholars equate the talents with the spiritual gifts that we are given. One of the authors whom I read while studying spiritual gifts many years ago even said, the only sin God won't forgive is not using your spiritual gifts. No doubt he was relying heavily on this parable for that statement. Although I believe that God will forgive any sin, failing to use of gifts could signal however that we are not truly accepting God's grace – which, as I have discussed before, could cause us to miss the kingdom of God.

This parable, like the Bible verses concerning spiritual gifts, makes clear that we receive differing gifts – 5 talents, 2 talents, 1 talent. It is never about how many or which one(s) though; it is about whether we use them to support God's church or in helping others to recognize the kingdom of God. Or are we too busy, too focused on ourselves, too focused on petty differences or biases that separate us from others, especially those already within our church – not to mention those outside to whom we are supposed to minister as well.

It clearly tells us that the reward for good work is more work – "I will put you in charge of many things." When you faithfully use your gifts to support the Body of Christ, the church, and this is the only purpose for the gifts, you will grow spiritually, and your ability will grow. On

the other hand, failure to use the gift will not help others and it will not help you.

Helmut Thielicke, a German protestant theologian of the last century, said: "A salty pagan, full of the juices of life, is a hundred times dearer to God, and also far more attractive to men, than a scribe who knows his Bible ... in whom none of this results in repentance, action, and above all, death of the self. A terrible curse hangs over the know-it-all who does nothing." I think this is the point that Jesus is trying to make today. We need to be doing God's work, but apathy and fear are our enemies. And failure to live in the present, keeps us from seeing the work that needs to be done.

Recall, if you will, the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Jewish man is beaten severely and robbed by bandits on the road to Jericho. Maybe the priest and the Levite had pity for the man, but not enough empathy to stop and help. Maybe they were afraid for their own safety; the perpetrators might still be nearby and could attack them also. Maybe, in their minds, they condemned those who attacked the man. We can't know for sure, but we do know that the Samaritan who passed that way, not only stopped to help, ignoring the danger or other concerns, and he went far beyond the minimum, taking the man to safety, paying for his care and offering to do whatever was necessary for this stranger – the other. As followers of Jesus, we are called to do more than others. We are called to take risks, not play it safe. Living the gospel is risky, but necessary.

In *A Handbook for Spiritual Directors: An Ignatian Guide for Accompanying Discernment of God's Will*, Fr. Timothy Gallagher reminds us: "God created us out of love so that we might praise and reverence his infinite love and goodness, and by dedicating our lives to his service, might enter an eternity of joyful communion with him. God created all other things on the earth for us, to help us attain this purpose for which he created us. ... As a result, we should appreciate and use these gifts of God – places, occupations, relationships, material possessions, and all the other blessings of God's creation..." (p 153-154) If not, we will be like the one who received one talent.

Therefore, be present in the moment, be fearless, and use your God-given gifts.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.