

The Disciples' Talent Show

In the name of him who died for us that we might live with him, dear friends in Christ: In these last few weeks of the Church year we focus our attention on the “last things”, that is, those subjects that have to do with the ending of this world and the beginning of the next. Accordingly, last week we heard Jesus stress the importance of remaining faithful until the very end. Through the Parable of the Ten Virgins, five of whom were wise and five foolish, he explained how it's necessary to continue to supply faith with its fuel, that is, God's Word and Sacraments, and in this way to ensure that you have the extra oil needed to keep the flame of faith burning through the long, cold night of this age. And specifically, what we want to keep alive and burning is the faith that holds we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ and his accomplished work on the cross alone, quite apart from any works of the law that we might do. We need to do this against the changing winds of the world and the foul gusts of breath that are devil's deceptions, which seek to blow out faith's flame. And we need to do this even more, perhaps, to guard ourselves from our own foolish apathy and laziness that would leave our flames unsupplied with the precious fuel needed to keep them burning brightly in the gathering gloom.

With that understood, today's Gospel reading, the Parable of the Talents, are the words of Jesus that follow immediately after his telling about the wise and foolish virgins. And whereas the former parable encourages us to continue to feed and supply our faith to keep it alive, *this* parable reminds us that faith is not a goal in itself; rather it is the means to an end. Our faith is meant to be put to work—not to earn salvation, that's been done. But an important aspect of true faith is that it naturally produces results. Just as the flame of an oil lamp produces heat and light, so also true faith is motivated by God's love to do the kinds of works in which he takes delight. And that's a good way to say it since, in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorts us to let our lights shine before men so that they may see our good works and give glory to God. And again, the idea is not that we go around showing off the works we do as if to say, “Oh look what we're doing. Aren't we wonderful?” No, the thought is that if you're living the Christian faith, the good that the Lord produces in you cannot help but be seen. It *will be* light in the darkness of this world – light that we don't cover up or hoard for ourselves; but that naturally casts its warm glow to all around.

And like I said, we don't do these good works *to be seen* – after all, many, perhaps most, won't be; at least not in the present. It's just that actually living in Christ's love will produce so many positive results that by their sheer number some will be noticed. And these will give people cause to recognize the Lord's presence and work among us. Thus, they serve as a witness to the world of God's grace and the truth of our confession of faith.

That's for the present anyway. In today's parable, Jesus indicates that there will come a day when *all* the good we have accomplished by faith will be put on display and evaluated. We might think of it as the end of the age *talent* show, when all those who were Christ's disciples on earth will display the talents they have earned for the Lord through working with the talents he initially entrusted to them.

But that requires some explanation. When we use the word *talent*, we think of a special skill or natural aptitude. Indeed, that's what the word has come to mean in our language. But *talent* is a word that we borrowed from the Greeks, and it refers to a measure of weight used

when exchanging large amounts of precious metal. Back then coins came in all kinds of sizes, so you exchanged them by weight rather than face value. A talent was about seventy-five pounds. So in the parable, the guy who received the one talent got seventy-five pounds of silver coins. At present market value that would be a little over \$20,000. But silver was more highly valued back then. We know that a talent of silver represented the total amount a working man would earn in about two years of steady employment. So what's that today? Maybe eighty to a hundred thousand dollars? It's a significant investment; and even more so for the fellows who received two or five talents.

But what do these talents of silver represent? Some theologians hold that they do indeed stand for the diverse skills and abilities the Lord gives to people. As a matter of fact, that's why the word "talent" has come to mean what it does in English: from such a narrow interpretation of this parable. Others suggest that a more literal approach be taken; that is, since the talents of silver are money, that's what they must refer to: a person's financial wealth. I'd submit that both answers at least part right; but along with a lot of other theologians, I think that's just the tip of the iceberg. It's better to understand that the talents stand for the entire gamut of the Lord's gifts that he distributes to his children with the expectation that they will be good stewards of what they've received and put it to good use for him.

And that's a good place to start: with a proper *attitude* of stewardship. The point is that everything we have and everything we are belongs to the Lord. For we ourselves have been bought with a price, the precious blood of God's Son. And what do we have in our possession that wasn't given to us by the Lord? Nothing, of course. That's where proper stewardship begins: with the recognition there is no such thing as mine. There's only what belongs to the Lord that he has entrusted to my care. And when the end of the age comes the question the Lord will ask is this: "What did you do with what I entrusted to you? Show me my talents. And, more importantly, show me what you gained for me with them."

With that in mind, I thought it might be good for us to run down a list of the things of which the Lord has made us his stewards and consider the sorts of things he might be looking for as a return on his investment because in most cases it isn't the same as the investment itself. I've mentioned two already, and since they're the ones we naturally think of first when discussing stewardship, we might as well tackle them first.

Money is probably the big one, right? And to that we'd probably want to add all forms of worldly wealth: land, houses, savings, goods, and everything else. We've all got some. None of us has the same amount. And all of us would probably like to have some more. That sound about right? Well, it happens that how much or little of it you have is never the issue. The impoverished widow with her two small coins proved that when she gave more generously than all the rich people who gave much more than she did. And the fact of the matter is that money stewardship goes far beyond how much or little you donate to the church and its various ministries. It's an attitude of the heart. I mean, we've all got to cover the expenses for the basic necessities of life. If you don't, you become a liability to others. So that's the first goal. Where we run into trouble is when we start determining what is a necessity and what is a luxury. And don't get me wrong: there's nothing wrong with enjoying the pleasures wealth can buy. The Lord has filled this world with many wonderful things, and for those who can afford them that's just great. But a good steward is always mindful of a proper sense of proportion. He doesn't see his wealth as simply the means to indulge his own selfish pleasures. Rather he understands that the more he has, the more responsibility he has to use what the Lord has entrusted to him to alleviate suffering, want, and need; to support worthy causes; to further the spread of the Gospel; and to maintain the ministry of Word and Sacrament that keeps his faith

and the faith of others alive. These are the kinds of investments that produce the gains the Lord seeks. A good steward seeks to find the right balance.

A second kind of “talent” we’ve already mentioned is just that: the natural talents and abilities the Lord has distributed to us. Again, the Lord has not assigned these evenly to his children. Brains, brawn, charisma, leadership, technical skills, musical ability, you name it – the Lord has determined how much or little of them each of us have. We all have them in different proportion. And he’s given them to us that we might put them to work for him in the roles that best suit the combination we have. Two problems tend to crop up here. One is that I might not like the role I’m best suited for and so resist it. Then I’m not investing God’s gift wisely. The other is that to avoid a role I might be suited for, I might “bury” my talent by hiding it from view. In the parable Jesus makes it pretty clear that he takes a dim view of either of these approaches. A good steward recognizes his strengths and plays to them. He serves gladly where he serves best. At the same time, he works on improving his weaknesses so that he may be more effective overall.

A third talent, not yet mentioned, that we all have in equal measure is time. And a lot of what was said about wealth applies here. That is, we need some for ourselves: for sleeping, personal hygiene, recreation, and all; but the stewardship issue comes up in determining how much I think I need for myself and how much I’m willing to spend for other worthy causes. And besides just frittering away this precious resource in frivolous pursuits, which we are all guilty of, perhaps the greatest offense to good stewardship in this category comes in the form of procrastination. I tell myself I’ll be more spiritual tomorrow, or next week, or next year. That’s when I’ll pray. That’s when I’ll spend more time in the Scriptures. That’s when I’ll get around to volunteering. That’s when I’ll see if I can help my neighbor in need. But investments made in time are like money put down earning interest. The sooner you invest, the more the investment grows. A good steward doesn’t wait. He invests the time as soon as he has it.

Okay, time, treasure, talents: those are usually the big three we think about when discussing being stewards of what the Lord has entrusted to our care. And that’s a good start. But the Lord has given us a number of other things in trust that we would do well to consider. Your body, for example. The Lord has given you that to take care of for him. And we show ourselves to be good stewards when we invest in doing what we can to ensure its overall health and well being. You know, eating a proper diet, getting enough exercise, and avoiding unhealthy activities. It only makes sense. You can’t be an effective steward with your other talents if you’ve neglected the temple in which your spirit dwells.

And next to your own body, if you are married, the Lord has given you a spouse to take care of for him. He or she too is a trust from the Lord – one that you have taken a sacred oath to love, honor, and cherish. A good steward recognizes this and invests accordingly in keeping the marriage relationship strong. Similarly, if you are a parent, then the Lord has entrusted you with a child or with children to care for and to raise properly in such a way that they mature in the true faith and come to be good stewards themselves of all that God has given.

Finally, it’s worth mentioning that this church is part of the sacred trust of which the Lord has made you a caretaker. The building and grounds are part of it, sure; but vastly more important are the people here who are your family in Christ. God has given us each other to care for. And he’s also given us what it is that unites us: our faith in Jesus Christ. He’s given us a heritage of solid doctrine and absolute respect for the truthfulness of his Holy Word. He’s given us the supreme assurance of the Sacraments. These are treasures without price. As good stewards we want to invest ourselves in them so that our faithfulness will grow.

The questions we have to ask in all these things are: Are we squandering the opportunities? Are we wasting our resources? Are we hiding our talents or neglecting them? Are we being good stewards of what the Lord has entrusted to our care? And if we're honest about it, I think we'll come up with the same answer. We're not doing very well, are we?

The mistake would be to be like the guy who was afraid of his Lord and who said to himself, "No matter what I do, it won't be enough to satisfy him. So I'll just bury my talent, sit on my hands, and give it back to him when he returns." That fellow showed that not only was he lazy; but that he didn't really know who it was he was working for. The Lord is not the cruel tyrant he imagined. Instead the Lord is gracious, forgiving, and abounding in love. That's why he appointed us his stewards in the first place, for surely, we did not deserve it. And when we go to him now confessing our faults and trusting in Christ, instead of casting us away as failures he makes more investments in us: he forgives our sin, he strengthens our faith, and he gives us his own Spirit to aid us and help us overcome our weaknesses. He really does want us to be winners in his final talent show.

And we can be by making wise investments with what he's given us. Think of it this way: if you knew twenty years ago what the really valuable stocks today would be, wouldn't you have invested everything you could in them? Of course, you would have. Now, I've just spent the last twenty minutes telling you what "stocks" are going to pay off big for all eternity. Let's be good stewards. May God give us the grace and wisdom to be such and his forgiveness when we fail, that we too may hear his words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!