

## **Five Fruitful Practices: Risk taking mission and Service**

March 22, 2009

As Jesus came to the end of his Earthly ministry, he wanted to prepare his Disciples for the ministry of the Church...for the time when they and we would be lead by the Holy Spirit in the world...but when he would not be with us in bodily form. We would be on our own in many ways. It is often hard to hear the voice of the Lord when we pray, we are too busy, too tired, too distracted, and world is going too fast...there is too much background noise...there are many, many reasons. And sometimes we are asked to wait for the answers. I don't know about you, but I don't like to wait.

So Jesus told a variety of parables about waiting, and watching and working as we wait for his coming again. He told us that no one knows the time of that coming...so don't be fooled by those who claim some special knowledge or insight into the coming of the Lord or the workings of the world and God's great plans. Those who have made such claims have been wrong for generations and these today will be wrong again. The bible clearly says NO ONE KNOWS except God. No one, especially not the little guy on T.V. with the slicked back hair who perspires a lot!

Jesus was clear that as we wait, we are to wait and to work...to be active in the world. The Church of Jesus Christ is to continue to carry out his ministry...not on our own. Oh No. Alone we can do nothing. We must work together as the Body of Christ, relying on each other for wisdom, strength, support, energy and relief...and we must rely on Him and the working of his wonderful Holy Spirit for guidance, help, direction and power to be in ministry and to make that ministry effective in the lives of others. The Holy Spirit takes our common efforts and gives them uncommon affect. The Holy Spirit can take our common words and give them spiritual power in the hearts and minds of others,

using them to touch and heal and challenge in ways that we can never imagine and only pray for...so is my humble pray each week honestly. Without God's help, I am nothing and my words but dust in my mouth! So we come to this fourth in our series of the five fruitful practices in the life of a congregation that seeks to be faithful in its following of Christ and service to others...risk taking mission and service to others. The text I have chosen is a familiar one and one of my favorites...although for those who know me well that is a kind of inside joke because there are so many favorite scriptures that it is kind of funny! How many favorite bible verses can you have? I don't know...haven't stopped picking them yet!

Anyway...the parable of the talents comes in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew...a chapter that relates to Jesus call to his disciples and us to wait, watch and work after he is gone from among them in body (but not in spirit).

It is important to know how different the concept of divine reward or pay is from our own human concept. God is not obligated in the slightest respect or compelled by the amount of work we have done in the least. Consider what God has done, and what our work amounts to compared to what God has done...God's reward is a gift he gives, a royal bounty which far exceeds any value of any service we might have done. Payment or reward is far beyond any merit or independent of the worker's achievements, it's sole root is God's generosity and amazing grace.

This means that in the story God is not concerned with the amount of return earned, but with the faithful service of each individual. That is what is important to the master...what each does with what they have, not how much they earn, their rate of return so to speak. The Master has enough already and is not concerned with having more.

The parable teaches us that we are each given great treasures. The story that Jesus tells uses the word talent. In his day this was a measure

of weight, used for a large sum of money. The talent was 6000 denarius, a denarius was one days wages on averages. So, using the 2007 census figures, the one servant who received 5000 talents received amount approximately \$6,909,730.

The one who received 2 talents received \$2,769,790, and the person who only received one talent...the one that perhaps we feel sorry for because he was slighted by the master...only received a measly \$1,384,473.

So, each of these servants were loved and trusted by the master with a great sum of money. The crowd of ordinary people would have been flabbergasted by the sums of money Jesus was talking about. It was like each of them had won the lottery, and the idea of taking that kind of money and putting it in a jar and burying it in the ground in your backyard would have led to howls of laughter and jeers of derision.

It is interesting that the parable is really not about money, is it? I found out something interesting this week. The English word talent comes from this text. It comes from the translation of the Roman word Talent, and broadly defined it means a gift or ability that is given to someone...because from the very beginning throughout the church this text has always been preached as more than money. Everyone knew that Jesus was talking about more than money here...and so the roman word Talent that meant a measure of weight commonly used for money became the English word for an ability or talent that a person was endowed with or was given from God almighty.

The Church is in the business of using the talents God has given us. Sometimes we have a lot of talents, and sometimes not so many. But in reality, we can never really cry poverty. We are always like those who have won the lottery. Because we have the Holy Spirit of God working with us and in us, and God's Spirit is full of Power and Strength to renew us and guide us and to rise up other workers to come along side

us and help us. As we pray we are renewed and strengthened and guided...we are never alone. God is with us and helping us. Just like the parable, we take our talents and invest them for God, and the return is assured. Not always the way we expect, the way we want or the timeline we expect...that's for sure! But we can rest assured that God is at work in ways we do not yet see.

Risk taking is part of the picture. We can not play it safe and be people of faith. To have faith is to trust God. Trust request our willingness to step out...sometimes into the unknown. To put our hand in God's and rely upon God. That is not to take a foolish risk. We are to do our homework and use the gifts that God has given us...but there comes a time of trusting and relying on God...when we must say YES to God and step forward even though we are not 100% sure of what the future holds. And if you think that this is foreign or somehow new...remember we pray thus each week:

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”  
We are in the business of helping bring God's kingdom on Earth, in the real world. What does that look like? The poor are fed, the broken hearted are brought close and bound up. The down and out are lifted up, the lonely and lost are consoled and counseled and all God's children are called home and everyone is welcomed...saint and sinner alike, rich and poor, man and woman, young and old, gay and straight, white and black, Asian and Hispanic, all are brought in.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, throughout the whole world...here and everywhere.

To love is to take risks. It is to take the first step, the and second. To reach out and try. To be willing to be seen as a fool sometimes, to risk rejection and ridicule.

The more you trust, the more you are willing to risk. In our story, the one servant had a hard view of the master. He was afraid of the master and afraid of the future, and he let his fear get the better of

him. He was paralyzed by fear and decided it was safer to do nothing...just hold on for better days, safer times, easier markets, and he hid the talent in the ground and waited for the master to return and gave him back a somewhat dirty but whole talent of silver. But that is not what it was given for. If the master had wanted to keep it safe, he could have put it in the bank himself.

The story is about faithful effort, not successful. The story tells us that faithful is successful. In God's economy, those who are faithful, get a great reward. Each who puts the talent to work doubles it. This is a parable, it is not fact. It is designed to teach us that if we invest ourselves, our talents, abilities, and gifts in God's kingdom, we will receive in return.

It reminds me of a passage we studied in our Friday night Bible Study...Luke 6:38 "Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full, pressed down, shaken together, to make room for more, running over, and poured over into your lap. The measure you give will be the measure you get back."

This does not mean that God is going to give you so much because you gave so much. It is not that if you give a 1/10, God will give you 10X that...like the old Oral Roberts' hour on TV used to preach, if you need \$100, give us \$10. If you need \$1000, give us \$100. If you need \$10,000, give us \$1,000...etc. they were always looking for those folks who desperately needed \$10,000,000. God does not work like this...it is not some sort of cosmic slot machine, put so much in, get so much out again. If only...we could solve all our money problems today!

But it is true that if you are a generous person, if you give from the heart, you will receive more than you give. Not in money, but in life. You will be blessed. The measure they use is used on them...Those who do not give of their time, talent, energy or money, ...they hide their treasures in the ground, and well, they live in scarcity on all fronts.

Church is designed to be a place that reaches out. As a downtown church, we are aware that we need to be in ministry in ways that share the compassion of Christ with others. We know that this is part of our call in deciding to stay downtown. After the fire, our church had the chance to move out of the downtown core. There were some who thought we ought to do as many churches did in the 70's and get out of the core...it is not easy doing church in the core. The needs downtown are obvious and at times overwhelming. But after much discussion and prayer, we believed that this was God's call to us. What would we be saying to the families who lived downtown if we chose to move...because it made our lives easier....

Is that part of God's call...to make our lives easier? Where in the bible does it say a church should make it's ministry decisions based on that criteria?

So we decided to stay.

And over the years we have faced many challenges. Some of them small and some of them great. one of the greatest was our decision to swallow hard and decide to buy the Vintage Tower. I won't go into all the details. It took a long time...I mean a LONG time. We tried to buy it from it's previous owner and were in escrow when the City of San Jose changed its mind and decided to take the building for itself. That caused a several year delay.

We were very discouraged, to say the least. But in time, the city changed its mind and asked us if we would buy it from them. This resulted in a couple of things that were different.

We got a better price and a better deal from the City.

We got a California Housing Finance Agency bond (two actually) for over 5million at low interest for 40 year term

We were able to make the entire building low and very low income...which we wanted to do but would not have been able to push through the first time.

We were able to negotiate the separation of the parking lot parcel as a separate piece of property to enable future development, helping creatively fund programs and buildings

We are able to serve low income individuals and families for generations to come....

So, we use our talents, we take risks, and we continue in God's timing.

God has given each of you various talents...that are priceless. Added to those around you, they make up the ministry of Christ's body and enables us to serve others in the power and Spirit of Christ our Lord. We join together to share the love of Christ in that spirit of grace and hope...knowing that together we can make a difference...and that we are called to be faithful in following Him