

Nov. 16

Once during my seminary days, we had a stage production for invited guests; my closest friend was the M.C. and he started off by introducing the seminarians to the invited guest by listing our talents...until he came to me. He just stood there and looked blank; after several seconds, he finally mumbled something (like he doesn't kill dogs) and the show continued. To me, it was both embarrassing and funny; after all, if my closest friend couldn't think of anything to say about my abilities, I had to wonder about them myself. He had inadvertently hit upon my problem of low self-esteem; and even though I was ordained at 25, it wasn't until my mid-thirties that I truly began to believe in myself and what I had to offer.

In today's gospel, the first two servants who were given money to invest seemed to be confident in their own abilities, but the focus of the parable is in fact on the third, useless servant. Scripture scholars believe that he represents the scribes and the Pharisees and their attitude towards God and the law. As you recall, he buried his talent in the ground in order that he might hand it back to his master exactly as it was given to him. Truth be told, the whole aim of the scribes and Pharisees was to keep the law just as it was. In their own words, they sought to build a fence around the law. And so any change, any development, any alteration, anything new was to them an anathema—and it is for that reasoning that they were routinely condemned by Jesus. As a result, this attitude resulted in a paralysis of religious thinking and removed any possibility of spiritual development. I truly believe that for us to grow spiritually, however, we must venture outside of our comfort zones. And to this end, Jesus tells us that there can be no spiritual growth without adventure and that God is frustrated when we push the Spirit out of our lives.

In verse 1 of this chapter, Jesus said: Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this... and in verse 14, which opens today's gospel, Jesus continued: For the kingdom of heaven occurs when a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves....and continues on as we've already read.

The kingdom of heaven, then is not some place where we lie around on clouds all day listening to harp music. Rather, the kingdom begins in this life. Certainly it continues into eternity, but right now, there are things that our Master expects us to do. It's easy to look at some of the great men and women of the faith and say: But I could never do what they did. And that may be true. Moses, Joshua, Deborah, David, Mary, Peter, John, Paul, and Mother Teresa—all these did significant and world-changing activities for the sake of the kingdom. We should note, however, that this parable has a game-changing phrase in it that affects all of us and that phrase is: The master gave the talents to the three servants, EACH according to his ability and so we don't have to like any of those remarkable individuals.

We do not have to measure up to anyone else. Each of us is called to be the person God created us to be—he has expectations only according to our own abilities.

Jesus also gave us clues as to how each of these men viewed the master. All three received talents according to their abilities, but the first two recognized the fact that the master had given them a great gift and opportunity, a time for adventure. Naturally, they wanted to please him, so they worked hard to fully utilize their gifts.

Since this is a kingdom parable, Jesus obviously positioned the master in the story to represent God. The first two men viewed God as good and they were eager to please him. They recognized that they owed their life and all they had to him; consequently working hard for God was reward enough, even though the master managed to sneak in an added bonus for them.

The third man, however, saw the master and saw God as someone to be feared. Recall that he said: I knew that you were a harsh man...so I was afraid. Sadly by risking nothing, in the end, he actually lost everything that he once had.

God entrusts talents and abilities to us so that the work of the kingdom of heaven can be done with fervor.

Several things come to mind when we think about the talents. Certainly Paul's various lists of the "gifts of the Spirit" fit in here. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul lists a number of these gifts and stresses that they are all necessary for the Body of Christ, the Church, to function properly. He encourages the Church to explore and use these gifts so that the Church can reach its full potential.

So when the first two men gave a reckoning to the master, he was pleased—not just because they successfully increased the amount of their talents—but because they used what they were given in significant and meaningful ways.

And so it is not surprising that the master was disappointed with the third slave. He had no profit to show, but more to the point, he did not use at all that he had been given.

And so what are we meant to glean from this parable?

First, it tells us that God gives us differing gifts. One man received five talents, another two and another one. It is not the amount of our talent that matters; what matters is how we use that talent. God never demands from us abilities that we do not have; but he does fully demand that we use the abilities that we do possess. We human beings may not be equal in talent; but we can be equal in effort. The parable tells us that whatever talent we have, little or great, we must fully use in the service of God.

Second, the parable tells us that the reward of work well done is still more work to do. The two servants who had done well are not told to lean back and rest on their laurels because they had done so well. Instead, they are given greater tasks and greater responsibilities in the work of the kingdom of God.

Next, the parable tells us that those who are punished are the people who will not even try. The man with the one talent did not lose his talent; he simply did nothing with it. Even if he had lost it, it would have been better than to do nothing at all. It is always a temptation for the one talent person to say: I have so small a talent and I can do so little with it and so why should I even try? Such an attitude is to deny God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

And finally, the parable lays down a rule of life, which is universally true. If we have a talent and exercise it, we are progressively able to do more with it. But, if we have a talent and fail to exercise it, we will inevitably lose what we have. And so if I have some proficiency at basketball or music, then the more that I exercise that proficiency, the bigger the tasks I will be able to tackle.

Whereas if I fail to use a talent, I will lose it. That is equally true of playing golf or playing the piano. In the spiritual life, it is also true that the only way to maximize a gift is to use it in the service of God and in the service of our neighbors.

We don't know when the master will return; all that we know is that at some point our earthly life will come to an end and that will be that. And we will come to more fully appreciate that God expects stewardship from us, by way of our time, talents and treasure. All three are necessary in order to be a disciple of Jesus.

In the last 4 months, we have lost several key families who were devoted to St. John the Baptist parish; job transfers are a big problem here. And so we need new people to step up to the plate. To be honest, the ministry fair wasn't a huge success. During this stewardship month of November, I ask you to pick up one of these newly published ministry books for our parish, if you haven't already done so; you can find more of these booklets in the pamphlet rack by the fire place in the Gathering Space. Take a chance and look to see where you might fit in, where you can continue to help build up the community by offering your time and talents to God and to this wonderful parish.

Truly, the question is not whether we have talents, the question is whether we are willing to utilize them for the sake of the kingdom. As our bishop reminded us recently in a letter to the diocese, "when we really believe in the basic stewardship principle, we begin to live a life of sheer gratitude and security, knowing that we have all that we need in life for complete fulfillment... Furthermore, the petty jealousies and the stress of competition ebb away and we find ourselves actually delighting in the talents of others, complimenting their accomplishments and rejoicing in their successes. And we come to understand the meaning of St. Paul's insight that all of our gifts work together for the glory of God. As the Body of Christ, each of us contributes our unique gifts to make the whole Church complete and rich in talent."

In my one year here, I have come to realize that we truly have a remarkable parish, a living parish, filled with talent and possibilities. But the question always remains, for each of us: Am I open to adventure? Is St. John the Baptist community a priority in my life?

If I am alive, I must be open to adventure, open to taking the road less traveled, open to a life directed by God's grace—this is the meaning of discipleship.

And so even though my best friend couldn't think of any of my talents way back when, I—an intensely shy and introverted person—I am now able to publically stand before you as one of your priests. But none of us can stand alone—this is our parish, actually it is much more your parish than it is mine because we priests come and go, and so it is up to you to use your time, your talent and your treasure to hold St. John the Baptist parish together. And so I challenge you to join our wonderfully dedicated staff in order to continue to make St. John the Baptist parish a light proudly standing on a bushel basket for God and all His angels and saints to see.