Homily – What Is Yours to Do?
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For the last 3-4 months I have been searching. Ever since I was NOT elected bishop, I have been wondering where God is calling me. That calling is certainly HERE at St. Barnabas, and that is not going to change. But what else should I be doing. I think God has created each of us with a need to feel a sense of purpose. And while my purpose is to be here at St. Barnabas, it also feels like it is supposed to include something else. Some of you have a plate that is so full there is no need to add anything else. But for others of you, do you ever feel like you are searching and more specifically searching for a way to serve and make a difference?

Now, today's Gospel reading is known as the "Parable of the Talents." There is another version of this parable in the Gospel according to Luke, but today we are looking at Matthew's version. In this parable we have a man or master and we have three slaves or servants. Two of the slaves do well in the eyes of the man by earning more money or talents and the third slave is condemned by the man for burying the money and not providing an increase in the talents.

The traditional interpretation of this parable is that it is a lesson about money or wealth. The traditional interpretation seems to have Jesus supporting our twenty-first century views of capitalism and the accumulation of wealth. Sometimes we forget that capitalism is a modern way of thinking. Sometimes we forget that any economic system is a human invention. God does not support one economic system over another, but we know from the Bible, and from Jesus, that God wants any economic system to ensure compassion for all. We are to care for the widow and the orphan. We are to feed the hungry and shelter the homeless. As followers of Jesus, we know that any economic system must care for all. And, two thousand years ago, Jesus lived in an agrarian society that had no economic growth. If one person was to accumulate more wealth then it had to come from another person. Thus, it was considered gauche and crass to accumulate wealth and take from others. Two thousand years ago it was the third slave who did the proper thing. Two thousand years ago, the man and the first two slaves are the ones who went against the prevailing moral code of the day. So, what is going on with this teaching of Jesus? Is he just reenforcing the adage that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? I think not. So, let's look for another meaning to this parable that fits with love, wholeness, and union.

As followers of Jesus, we often like to say that Jesus is the path. This second part of the Trinity, this God who became man is the path to salvation and eternal life. I certainly believe this is true, but Jesus is also a teacher of wisdom. He is the path, but

he also reveals the path to us, and that path is always movement towards love, towards wholeness, towards union with God. Anything in the Bible, anything in the teachings of Jesus, anything in our spiritual journey that does not lead to love, wholeness and union is a distraction, and we must continue to sift through each of the teachings of Jesus until we see how they fit into love.

So, there is a second traditional interpretation of today's parable that hinges on the word "talent." Two thousand years ago a talent was equal to twenty years of daily wages. So, it was a lot of money. But, today to us the word "talent" means something else. We define "talent" as a natural aptitude or skill. Synonyms include gift, knack, or ability. And, when we use this contemporary definition then the Parable of the Talents takes us on another path. In this way Jesus' parable means we are supposed to use and hone our natural aptitudes and skills. As followers of Jesus, we believe that all our blessings are gifts from God including the gift of our natural aptitudes and skills. The gift of piano playing is to be honed and improved. An aptitude with numbers is to be used to earn a daily wage or maybe to be part of our Finance Committee. A skill with writing is to be used to help others grow. Talents are to be shared and grown. Our churches are especially dependent on the sharing of talents. With stewardship we don't just talk about money. Instead, we say that stewardship is the sharing of the time, talent, and treasure that has been gifted to us by God. So, perhaps Jesus is encouraging all of us to share our talents with the church so that we can do all those good things that a church is supposed to do. I guess in this way today's Parable is teaching us something that IS in line with love, wholeness, and union with God. Not much of a stretch to see how sharing of talents can lead to good things. Our challenge is to figure out or discern what we should be doing. How should we be serving? All of us, every single person has a call to serve. So what is yours to do?

Now, there are some weeks when I am preparing a sermon, and I am struggling. I struggle with yet another new thing to say about a bible passage that I have preached on before. Part of the reason for this is that I want to learn something new in my own spiritual journey that will help me towards love, wholeness and union. Study is one of my favorite spiritual practices and when I learn something new it makes me smile. And by chance, or maybe it is serendipity, or maybe it is the Holy Spirit, somehow, this past week, there was a perfect blog post from the Center for Action and Contemplation. Here is my summary of the post as it fits in with talents.

We are all called by the Holy Spirit to serve in ways that benefit others. We were created to answer this call, and there are three basic levels of social ministry within which we can each serve. Imagine for a moment that there is a river flooding out of control. This river symbolizes the circumstances and injustices that bring about

suffering, and the river is overflowing its banks and sweeping those in its path off their feet.

At the first level in which we share our talents, we rescue drowning people from the swollen river. At this first level we deal with the immediate social problem right in front of us: someone hungry comes to our door and we offer them some food or invite them inside. These are hands-on, social service ministries, like our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop, our Peoples Kitchen lunch ministry, and our grocery ministry with more than fifty ICE families in Santa Maria. This also includes the Five Cities Food Bank and Five Cities Homeless Coalition. When doing these ministries, we are the hands of Jesus in the world. We make the world a better place by answering God's call.

At the second level of talent sharing, there are ministries that help people not to fall into the swollen river in the first place, or show them how to survive despite falling in. In general, these are the ministries of education and healing. Most of the religious orders in the Catholic Church in the last three hundred years went in that direction, filling the world with schools, hospitals, and social service ministries that empowered people and gave them new visions and possibilities for their lives. I think this includes our work with prisoners at CMC and the letter writing that our Scribes do with inmates. And we give away three thousand dollars a month from our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop, and those outreach recipients that don't fit in the first level of service, would fit into this second level. Those of you who work in education would also fit into this category.

Finally, on the third level, some ministries build and maintain a dam to stop the river from flooding in the first place. This is the work of social activism and advocacy, critique of systems, organizing, speeches, boycotts, protests, and resistance against all forms of systemic injustice and deceit. This is the gift of few, and a very much-needed gift. This level seeks systemic change and not just individual conversion. Over the last few years on average, I've attended 2-3 rallies per year.

And I know that many of you here today don't feel called to activism. As a church we don't tend to organize you for action and instead we leave it up to individuals to do this organizing. The only events for which we rally the troops tend to be LGBTQ pride events.
Three levels of service: helping someone out of the flooded river, keeping them from falling in to begin with, and building the dam to keep the river from flooding. Three ways to serve, and most of us having gifts in just one of these areas.

One of the things I have learned over the decades is that when we come to know our own soul gift more clearly, and as we learn about ourselves we almost always have to let go of other "gifts" and opportunities so we can do our own one or two things well

and with integrity. I believe that if we can do one or two things wholeheartedly, that is all God expects.

The important thing is that we all should be doing something for the rest of the world! As Bishop Lucinda said last week, we all have work to repair the breach in many parts of society. We have to give back, particularly those of us born into privilege and comfort. Which of these three levels is yours to do? And we also must respect and support the other two levels, even if we cannot do them ourselves. Remember to avoid all comparisons about better or lesser, more committed or less committed; for those are all ego games. Instead, let us all just use our different gifts to create a unity in the work of service, and back one another up, without criticism or competition. Only in our peaceful, mutual honoring do we show forth the glory of God.

So, remember when a story or teaching in the Bible is not in alignment with love, wholeness and union, then it is a teaching that is not of God. Then, look for another meaning that is. There are many ways to serve, and when we understand our talents, we gravitate towards some ways of serving and away from other ways. I am considering becoming an activist on a particular topic that is important to me, but I haven't made a final decision. We must all discern what is ours to do. I know that a lot of you here today are working hard at your spiritual journeys and you already serve. You recognize the God who is already within you, and you help others do the same. YOU are honing your talents and evolving into union with God.