

24 Pentecost 2020

Lord, even now, despite all interpretation and study, we are so like the disciples of old, unable to share the fullness of Gospel Truth. May the Spirit regenerate a new vitality so that we might be living stories of Jesus Christ, unique, but united before the world to proclaim Good News. Amen.

I had mentioned to you before about my recent virtual deployment with the Red Cross. I was not able to deploy in person again, so this was a different opportunity to serve others in need. The purpose of this deployment was to take phone calls from around the country, from folks who had lost a loved one from COVID or who had been affected by COVID themselves. We would take a 6 hour shift a day for two weeks. Turns out that many of the calls were not about losing a loved one, but were from people who had been affected by the hurricanes and tropical storms in the South and the East coast. Many were seeking help due to loss of homes, damage to homes, loss of jobs, or looking for food resources. Yet there were some who had lost someone to COVID and were seeking assistance with funeral expenses or transportation of remains. Most of the calls that I took were from people seeking home repairs, car repairs, or waiting on assistance from FEMA or the Red Cross. I was on this team as a spiritual care provider. Regardless of the stated need, they were all ministry calls for me. I would usually end the call by telling the person that I was a spiritual care provider and offer prayer if they would like it. Many said yes. There was one young Lady from Louisiana that asked if she could pray for me and she did. I thought that was great!

I bring this up due to our gospel reading this morning.

There are many opinions about what the message is from this parable as told by Matthew. I know that in the past, I have thought that Jesus may have been talking about a distribution of abilities or gifts rather than money. I don't think this was the case, although if he were, it is true that every single one of us has been given talents by God which we are expected to use. We are certainly not expected to bury them or ignore them and to let them go unused.

However, it is more likely that Jesus is talking about a knowledge of God's kingdom which has been made known to his followers in differing ways and in different amounts. Scholars look back to Ch 13 in Matthew to help explain this interpretation. In verses 10-15, we read:

10 "The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" 11 He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. 14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'

So, Jesus had already explained today's parable in an earlier chapter.

I believe that we have been given access to this knowledge and not only are we expected to learn as much as we can, we are expected to **share** that knowledge with others. Unlike the scribes and pharisees, in the time of Jesus, we are not to hoard this knowledge for ourselves. In 2013, I took a job with the VA down in Memphis Tn. If you love BBQ, this is an excellent place to live. And I tried out every place that I could while I was there. One of the reasons why I did not enjoy my time in Memphis, was that the culture there was difficult to get used to if you were from up north. When I first arrived to my new job, I had to wait a week before I was able to get to work because the person in HR who needed to give me access to the computers, was on vacation and she was the only one in the entire department who knew how to do it. As you can imagine, this was frustrating. I was told that this was fairly common as folks kept this knowledge from others in the department, so no one else could do their job thereby maintaining job security.

Apparently, this works well for individuals but greatly hinders productivity.

Jesus knew that if God's kingdom was to be known throughout the world, his followers were the ones that had to share it. The problem today, is that many Christians do not feel up to the task due to feelings of inadequacy, fear, or it is not a priority for them. I, for one, was not raised at a time when Bible studies were a popular thing for Catholics. They are much more common now if one takes advantage of them. It is even harder for those of us, who are introverts, to talk to others about Jesus. I preferred sharing through action. A quote that has been attributed to Francis of Assisi, was that we are to "preach the Gospel and if necessary, use words." I am much better at the action part and have had to work at the talking portion of sharing Jesus with others.

With the current pandemic, using words has become the primary method of sharing the Good News due to physical distancing. We have had to get good at technology as best we could. The pandemic has hurt many congregations that were already struggling with Sunday attendance. I felt that the theology of the 'build it and they will come' policy had passed us by quite a while ago. In other words, that fancier liturgies, bands, rocking music and better coffee hours would bring people back to our congregations in droves. This worked for a time by the large evangelical churches but is even slowing down for them. If you look around at many Episcopal congregations, not much is working at all. For those churches that are growing, it appears to be a process that takes time to get moving and involves a large part of the congregation going out into the neighborhoods, and the community at large, to find out what the needs are and witnessing how Jesus is working in their lives. **It is not easy** and requires time to develop.

Next Sunday, Bishop Perry will have her visitation with us. My hope is that she will share what the process of growth looked like at her congregation in Chicago and how we might mirror some of that here in South Michigan. I believe, in my humble opinion, that the primary focus should be on sharing Jesus with our friends, families, neighbors, and the

community. Jesus did not tell the disciples to go forth and start churches, but to share the Good News of God's kingdom. Not surprisingly, when they did, Christian communities were formed, and relationships developed. I still believe that sharing the Good News is based upon relationships. Otherwise it is superficial and may not have a chance to take root. Forming those relationships can be scary. It still is for me. —

John Ortberg, wrote in "If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat":

"Fear and growth go together like macaroni and cheese. It's a package deal. The decision to grow always involves a choice between risk and comfort. This means that to be a follower of Jesus you must renounce comfort as the ultimate value of your life. And that's sobering news to most of us, because we're into comfort." (end quote) (Zondervan, 2001), 17.

Over the years, in part because we find ourselves to be so very busy with life, a sense of routine and normalcy has set in. 2020 has really shaken this up. Out of necessity, we have had to adapt to a new normal and who knows what this will even look like 6 months from now. More than ever, people need to know who Jesus is and how much we are loved by him.

If we are followers of Jesus, if we are vessels of the Holy Spirit of God, we have some form of investment currency — given to us by God — to trade, buy, barter, enhance, use, grow, develop and increase for the glory of God. That part is a sure thing. Now we are expected to use those gifts to grow the Kingdom. This brings me back to my Red Cross deployments. Working in a shelter to help those in need or talking to those folks on the phone who might be calling to find help for their damaged home is all still ministry. Helping to deliver boxes of food to those in need is ministry. Asking if a friend would like prayers is definitely ministry. Sitting with someone who has lost a loved one, and just being there with them, is ministry. Sharing your story with others, how Jesus affects your life every single day, is a gift. It is also necessary as part of our journey as Christians. We cannot do any of this if we stay in the safe confines of the boat. It is important that we take that first step out onto the

water and reach for the hand of Jesus. My friends, this is not pie in the sky theology. We live in difficult times and people are scared. 2020 just never stops coming up with more surprises. But I cannot think of anything more realistic and concrete than going through life holding on to the hand of Jesus and helping others to step out of the boat to do the same. Jesus has made a good investment in each of us.

And when Jesus comes to check on his investment, may he say to you: "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Amen