

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deacon Joe MT 25:14-30

I want to congratulate the champions. Anytime our town can rise up to bring home a championship, it is worth celebrating and acknowledging all the talent that went into the winning effort. Not just the players and the coaches but the cheer squad, the band, the support of the fans and the parents of the team. What a great effort. Congratulations.

Likewise, I am so proud of our parish. We can experience so many ministries, prayer groups, and opportunities to come together as a family of Christian champions. We each have that opportunity to carry Jesus into the world. Both tie so beautifully with the parable, Christ talks about today.

Our God-given gifts are meant to be used. Do we think of ourselves as servants, as dependent on God? In our world today, most people tend to think of themselves as the center of the universe. And our contemporary society, so full of technological power and easy pleasures, increases that tendency of our fallen nature.

But this parable and many others are very clear: we are not God. We are not the center of the world. We are dependent upon God, and our job in this life is simple. It is to know Him, love Him, and serve Him. Only by doing that will we find the happiness we desire, because doing that is why we were created: to know, love, and serve God.

And the parable also tells us how we are supposed to do that. God has given each of us a certain number of "talents." (In Greek that word referred to a large sum of money.) In this meaning of the parable, however, it refers more to what the English word implies - all the abilities and blessings we have received from God. God has given them to us, and we are free either to squander our gifts, burying them in the hole of self-indulgence, fear, laziness, and greed, or to use them as Christ would have us use them, which is the secret to happiness in this life and the life to come.

There is a wrong way to interpret this parable. So, I throw out this CAUTION. Some might think that Jesus is telling us that we are supposed to earn our salvation by our own activity, our works. But Jesus is not saying that. He is not saying that if we pray a certain number of Rosaries and light a certain number of candles, we will then deserve entrance into heaven. In fact, the idea that we can earn our own salvation has been formally condemned as a heresy – (the heresy of Pelagianism). Our efforts are useless without God's grace.

If we look carefully again at the parable, we see that the activity of the servants is necessary, but secondary. The primary agent of success is the master. He gives his servants an opportunity to try and make good use of their talents. He also hands out the talents in the first place. They didn't earn their original talents; they received them from the master's goodness.

It's like that in our relationship with God. He gives us life, the world, our faith, forgiveness, the sacraments, our talents - innumerable gifts. And if we use them well, they will serve their purpose, which is to bring us closer to Him, to fill our minds with wisdom and our hearts with joy, here on earth and forever in heaven. If we abuse those gifts, we can cut off our relationship with the one who gave them to us.

But in either case, we are the secondary agents of success; we cannot earn salvation; we can only receive the gift of God's grace and put it to good use.

Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta was someone who lived this. One of the many stories of how she impacted the lives of the poor illustrates beautifully what it means to use our God-given talents well.

Once she was staying with a community of sisters working with the Aborigines in Australia, she visited an elderly man who lived in total isolation, ignored by everyone; his home was disordered and dirty. She told him, "Please let me clean your house, wash your clothes and make your bed." He answered, "I'm OK like this. Let it be." She said, "You will be still better if you allow me to do it." He finally agreed. So, she was able to clean his house and wash his clothes. While she was cleaning, she discovered a beautiful lamp, covered with dust; it looked like it hadn't been used in years. She said to the man, "Don't you light that lamp? Don't you ever use it?" He answered, "No. No one comes to see me. I have no need to light it. Who would I do it for?" Mother Teresa asked, "Would you light it every night if the sisters came?" He replied, "Of course." From that day on, the sisters committed themselves to visiting him every evening.

Mother Teresa left Australia; two years passed. She had completely forgotten about that encounter. Then she received a message from him: "Tell my friend that the light she lit in my life continues to shine still."

In a sense, our life-mission is to do precisely that: to invest our talents in such a way that we light as many lamps as possible, in as many different ways as possible, bringing the Good News of God's trustworthiness, forgiveness, and love to all the people who are sick and dying with loneliness, or selfishness, or with regret.

So, Deacon Joe, we know all that but what do I need to do to take the next step?

First, we must identify what our gift is. We should always thank God for all countless blessings, but we should also reflect on the one or two strong characteristics, traits, or talents that God has given us personally. Second, let's get right with God. Pray daily and read and study scripture, frequent reception of the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation and attendance at mass. Third, put our gifts at the service of others. He left us his new commandment - to love one another as He has loved us. And He showed us what love really is: to give our lives for others. We give our lives by putting our talents at the service of those around us instead of just serving ourselves.

Our King is looking for our response. This may require us to step outside our comfort zone and to do things that are truly sacrificial, to take a risk, to trust Jesus in His guiding us.

Bringing our "A" game will always bring with it, the results Christ seeks.