

Proper 13
Luke 12:13-21

The rich man had a barn that was overflowing with his wealth. He was becoming even wealthier so he tore down that barn and built bigger barns – not just one bigger barn, but multiple bigger barns. He thought he was set for life – no more worries about enjoying life to the fullest, no more worries about security. We don't know if he shared his wealth and if he did, how he shared it. But the parable is very clear that the objective – the primary purpose – of the rich man's great wealth was for himself. Unfortunately for him, he died soon after his barns were built and filled. We all heard what God said to him, "This very night your life is being demanded of you. All of your wealth – whose will it be now? You're certainly not going to enjoy it and you know it's not coming with you. That's what happens when you gather wealth for yourself but are not rich toward God."

A few years ago, the billionaire Bill Gates asked his billionaire colleagues to join him and give away half their wealth to addressing the ills of the world – disease, poverty, hunger – all those things that Jesus charges his followers to do in Matthew 25. He says that as we address those ills in the world, it is as if we were addressing Jesus himself. We expand on this charge – what the church calls The Great Commission – when we say the baptismal covenant:

- Will you proclaim by words *and example* the Good News of God in Jesus Christ?
- Will you *seek and serve Christ in all persons*, loving your neighbor and yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among *all individuals*, and respect the dignity of *every human being*?

The act of baptism – of our becoming members of the Christian community – insists that our identity as Christians understand these questions, which are actually membership requirements, as central to the manifestation of our identity in the world.

One way the church has defined the answer to these questions is through what now seems to be the tired and too oft heard triumvirate of time, talent, and treasure. Not just treasure; not just time, not just talent – rather, time, talent, and treasure. But many of us get a little cranky when that trinity of expectations becomes a reminder of what expects of us. One of the reasons he spoke in parables was so that it was easier for his followers to understand him if he spoke in terms of daily life.

I suppose if we were to change a few words in the parable, the barns would turn into income and financial investments that continue to grow and whose primary purpose is the comfort of the owner of that treasure. Comfort would certainly not only to the owner but to his family – it was rare that a man would not be married. And just to make sure that comfort is guaranteed, earnings are poured back into the investments to provide even more income for the owner.

Why do we do this? Because we believe that all we have that God has given us – our talents, skills, and our ability to use them – are truly from God. And then we might say that we're blessed because God has provided us with the wherewithal to gather the fruits of our labors and look how full our barns are. Of course, some don't believe their gifts and skills are from God; they believe they personally are the source of their gifts and skills. Therefore God has nothing to do with their successes and doing God's work with their fruits of their labors is a non-issue.

But we all receive gifts from God to build up ourselves in the world but especially to build up the body of Christ. God has given us the gifts that will make the body of a Christ a well-oiled machine, if you will.

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A machine that is capable of proclaiming by word and example; a machine that is expert at seeking and serving Christ in all persons; a machine that efficiently strives for justice and peace and respects the dignity of every human being.

But it's not only about financial resources. It's about talent and time – or in the words of the New Testament – it's about gifts. How do we use the gifts we've been given? If we're competent and even successful in the work we do, those gifts will be reflected in our professional lives and perhaps in our volunteer activities. I say perhaps because some do not make the time for volunteer activities, let alone activities that live out the Gospel and baptismal imperatives. Or some make the time for extensive involvement in volunteer activities and a little time for committing time to live out our baptismal and Gospel imperatives. It's about time and gifts from God. And it's about treasure. Not or – not take your choice of the three. But all three. Unfortunately we Episcopalians tend to think the phrase is time, talents, or treasure. But it's not!

We spend more time talking about money – about our treasure – or at least it feels like we do – because that seems to hold and has held for millennia the greatest value among the many civilizations that have occupied the earth. It certainly has the greatest value in the United States, and over the years has served to widen the gap between those who have too much and those who have too little to live with any sense of dignity. The word “enough” is not a measure of value. The 66 books of the Bible have verses and passages and discussions that talk about money or some form of wealth – gold, silver, full barns, depending on the context – approximately 800 times. Jesus talks about money more than anything else except the Kingdom of God. But wealth is seen as something that one does not want to have too much of. Rather it is to be shared with God's people so that no one is wanting in their lives – so that all people have shelter, food, and clothing and/or that they are given a means to continue to care for themselves so that they, too, can share their gifts with others more in need.

Giving of our time and talent is an interesting topic. Many spends multiple hours in volunteer work having nothing to do with the church. That's really nice. Some call it “giving back to the community” or “paying it forward.” But I don't recall anyone saying their volunteer work is giving back to God, or “paying it forward” to seek and serve Christ in all peoples. Our time and talent tends to be sourced in our good will, which we is then acknowledged by the community. But is our time and talent – given to us by God – shared through the ministries of God's faith community in at least equal proportion? The question is often, “Well, I'm serving God's people through my volunteer work.” In a sense that's true. But we are Christians. So do we serve God's people as we proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? Probably not. We don't want to “force” our faith and beliefs on anyone, so we say very little. Proclaiming the Good News is less important than letting people know who we are and why we give of our time, talent, and treasure.

Are we embarrassed by our faith and religious identity? Well, the answer goes, you know how people feel about Christians – meaning the tel-evangelists who store barns full of wealth or the Christians who insist that their particular kinds of faith become inscribed in our legal system. Or even the Fred Phelps of the country who identify as Christians – in his case Baptist – and how Christians are perceived because of wing-nuts like him and Christian militia organizations. These Christians embarrass us so we're not going to talk about the Good News of Christ and let anyone know we're Christians. Or we say it's not appropriate in our professions and we don't want to offend anyone. Rather we compartmentalize our identities as Christians and let it out only in certain situations. For all of us there are plenty of opportunities to talk about our faith. Let me suggest that if we live it every day, it becomes quite comfortable to talk about how our values and actions are based in our life as a follower of the teachings and ministry of Jesus Christ. People of other faiths – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, for example – generally

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do not have a problem at least identifying themselves as people of a particular faith and sharing a little about why and how their faith informs their lives – their words, their actions toward other, their involvement in helping the needy.

Michael and I would often sit around and dream of what this parish could do to address the needs of the poor, hungry, and homeless in our community. Let's have a capital campaign that raises enough money, for example, to provide a location that is safe, healthy, and respectful for those who need a way out of their homeless situation. Maybe a piece of property that has small prefab houses or storage containers or some kind of shelter that will provide at least the semblance of a home. What more can we do? Or maybe St Clement's gets involved with building small wooden houses in a planned neighborhood in the way that Habitat for Humanity does. Or maybe we buy one of the empty schools and convert it into apartments for those who need a way out of their tents and sleeping bags and tarp coverings. Or maybe we serve at HIS every month instead of every other month, Or maybe we distribute food two Saturday a month rather than one. And maybe those meals are full meals that we prepare rather than the least expensive, money based menus. What more can we do? Yes, I know other organization provide these kinds of services, but there are not enough – and certainly not enough to address the needs of the thousands of homeless on our streets and the hundreds of families in the homeless population. Or maybe we buy the property that YO! House sits on and build homeless youth a proper facility that truly addresses their needs. What more can we do? All of those ideas take our time, our God-given gifts, and our treasure, no matter how great or how small.

The question used to be, "Would St Clement's be missed if we weren't here?" I believe the answer is now "Yes, it would be missed." The new question is, "What more can the people of St Clement's do?" As God's people, we are never finished sharing the Good News, we are never finished never finished seeking serving Christ in all peoples, we are never finished striving for justice and peace, we are never finished respecting the dignity of all persons. What more can we do can give us answers to those questions and provide us a way to define enough for ourselves and to share the rest as Jesus demands of us?

What more can we do as followers of Jesus? What more can we do to give thanks to God for all of the gifts that have made our lives possible and that have given us at least enough? What more can we do for those who have less?

What more can we do?

Elizabeth A Zivanov+
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