

Talent
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Prv 31; Mt 25:14-30)

In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus explains judgment day not in terms of keeping the commandments, but in terms of making a return on God's "investment." Our life is God's gift, described in the parable in terms of "talents" entrusted to our stewardship. What we make of our life is our gift to God. Mother Teresa often encouraged people to "*make your life something beautiful for God.*"

In biblical times, money consisted in the weight of precious silver or gold, known as a talent. A "talent" is the equivalent of about seventy pounds. Jesus uses the example of investing money to illustrate the spiritual lesson of using our life for the glory of his Father and the increase of his Kingdom. As a wise businessman invests his money in the art of trade and produces a great yield or profit, so must we utilize our spiritual gifts and "talents," investing them and putting them to work for the benefit of others and service of the Kingdom.

Firstly, we need to recognize what those talents are. Jesus says the master apportions talents to each steward "according to his ability." God blesses our nature at the time of birth with certain innate capabilities. Above all, God gives us the capacity to love and serve, reflecting His own Trinitarian Image, imitating His own inner Being. Throughout our lives, He customizes gifts and graces to each circumstance, making every moment an opportunity to invest ourselves and bring about increase. But it is through the encounter with His Son, and through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Baptism and Confirmation, that our true calling and capability is revealed. The Talents are above all the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

For instance, the life of St. Peter. He was born "Simon," a hardworking fisherman of Galilee, devoted to his family and his work. Upon meeting Jesus, the true potential of his life for the Kingdom of God is revealed—not simply to be a fisherman in the pond of Galilee, but to be a "fisher of men" in the ocean of the world itself, to be "Peter" the Rock on which Christ builds his Church. This capability was not something Peter could recognize without Christ. The "talents" are given us by Christ, and while they build upon our natural capabilities, they enable supernatural accomplishment.

The first step therefore, is to discern these supernatural gifts in our lives, to discern our vocation in Christ and recognize our true spiritual "name," the particular "talent" we are given for service in the Kingdom.

Secondly, there must be a commitment. In financial investment, the money has to be "put into" something: stocks must be bought, a business must be purchased. This involves risk. Shrewd businessmen do not invest lightly, but do

their homework. They carefully study and understand the nature of the investment, and even though “nothing is guaranteed,” they eventually make a confident purchase. Likewise in the call to follow Christ, one’s homework is to study and recognize Who he is, so that one may confidently proceed to invest oneself fully in him. Taking this risk is the obedience of *faith*.

In the case of Simon-Peter, he recognized the Lord through the miracle of the great catch (Lk 5:1-11), and immediately left his boats and nets, investing himself wholeheartedly in Christ. The diminutive Albanian nun Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu likewise learned of Christ throughout her life, and then recognized him fully in the face of a beggar at a train station in India. Her true talents were made known to her at this time, and she responded wholeheartedly, becoming Mother Teresa who also impacted not just a local ghetto, but the whole world.

The second step is the risk of faith, taking the step of investing oneself fully in Christ, giving and spending the “talent” to make profit – something beautiful – for God. Without self-surrendering total commitment, there is no prospect of heaven. The “useless servant” is thrown out because he was *afraid* of commitment; he buried his talent and refused to follow the divine call.

Thirdly, there is labor. The useless servant is thrown out because he was *lazy*. Many are turned away from their true capability because of the hard work, sacrifice, and perseverance involved. Once again, the saints illustrate the kind of dedication required to achieve great things for God.

It is the saints who illustrate this Parable of the Talents. They are the “good and faithful servants” who enter into the joy of their master. Each of them illustrates what a life is truly capable of, through the gift of spiritual riches entrusted by God. Any of them can serve as an example.

Two days ago, November 17, we celebrated the memorial of St. Elizabeth of Hungary. She was given in marriage to the King of Thuringia in southern Germany, and accomplished great things for her people during a time of calamities: floods, famine, plague. Working with the new Franciscan order, she strengthened the Church throughout the realm, and particularly sought to alleviate suffering in the midst of disasters. It was she who came up with the concept of a permanent, dedicated facility for the care of the sick. She set aside one of her castles for this purpose, installed 28 beds, and staffed it with medical and spiritual staff, personally tending to the sick as well. St. Elizabeth invented the modern “hospital.” She was mother of three children, and after her husband the King died of plague while on crusade, she managed the affairs of state. Now a widow, she took vows and joined the Franciscans, embracing personal poverty even as queen. St. Elizabeth died in 1231 at the age of 24! Whereas most Christians are called to

one particular vocation, this holy woman in her short life embraced them all: wife and mother, widow, head of state, nurse, administrator, and consecrated religious.

For many Christians, the vocation to holiness will be lived out in the special apostolic vocation of priesthood or religious life; but for most, the vocation will be matrimony, the sacred calling to build the Kingdom of God by raising a family. It is the first and most fundamental way man makes return to God for His original investment. God blessed the man and said, “be fruitful and multiply.”

For a Christian, marriage is more than the natural human question. It is a specific vocational path to holiness and service of the Kingdom. It requires the three steps of 1) careful discernment of the right spouse, 2) unconditional investment in the sacred bond of matrimony sealed by God at the altar, 3) lifelong service to God particularly by having and raising children.

The first reading from Proverbs describes the qualities for a young man to discern in a good wife (and himself be worthy of), and they are all the qualities of a saint: skilled, hard-working, considerate of others, strong in the Lord. Today’s parable needs to be applied in a particular way to Catholic marriages. So often, the world sees things in a “zero-sum” way, i.e., with a “subtract/divide” philosophy as embraced by the useless, fearful, lazy servant. According to the world, commitment reduces options (and potential). According to the world, more children means less to go around. In this context it can be clearly understood why the Church condemns as immoral the situation of divorce and remarriage, as well as the use of artificial means of contraception. These practices in effect “bury” the talent and prevent its supernatural purpose, cutting off the possibility of the yield which the Lord seeks.

A couple with seven children – very unusual in these times – is often questioned by friends: “How do you do it? How do you manage, having to divide yourself among so many needs and provide for so many?” To which the couple answers, “we never divide, we multiply.” Every *addition multiplies* the resources, the love, the capability. More is not less, it is exactly as Jesus says: “*to the one who has more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.*” Through the bond of marriage, the couple *is and is capable of* more than ever possible by the two separate individuals alone. Love never divides, and is never divisible. Love only increases and multiplies.

God has invested Himself in His creature, blessing man with tremendous spiritual treasure. Now we must show what we were able to accomplish.