

Matthew 25:14-30

## SHARE GOD'S LOVE

At our Officers' Retreat last month, Nancy Dawson, who is the General Presbyter of our Presbytery of the Peaks, led us through a series of exercises, which resulted in the adoption of a new mission statement for our church. Printed in bold type in the bulletin is the mission statement of the First Presbyterian Church of Martinsville, VA: Share God's love, embrace our neighbors, nurture each other. Today and the next two Sundays, I plan to preach a sermon series on our mission statement. After all, this is the banner under which we will march and serve Jesus Christ, as best we can, in the coming years. In grateful response for all that the Lord has done for us, this is what we will strive to do for our Lord: we will share God's love.

In order to share the love of God, we first acknowledge that God loves each and every one of us. As children, we were taught both scripture and song, which affirm this very basic theological truth: "We love because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19). When Dr. Karl Barth, the renowned German theologian of the last century, was asked to summarize the gist of the volumes of books he had written, he responded by saying: "Jesus loves me! this I know, for the Bible tells me so..." This fact is found throughout the Bible and it is the core of our Christian faith: we are loved greatly by God. No matter what messages and images our society tempts us with in order that we may have value, we know we have value and beauty already, and in abundance, because God loves us all. If we are able to believe that good news about ourselves, we are truly blessed indeed!

However, in affirming that God loves us, we also need to recognize that that's not all; there is more to be said. God's love is intended to be shared. God's love is for all people, and one of the ways that God has chosen to express the divine love is through you and me. God's love was best offered through the gift of the Son, Jesus Christ. And now, God offers love to us, and through us, for we are disciples of the Lord Jesus. There is plenty of God's love to go around; there is enough for all. And, one of the ways God hand-delivers the holy love is through you and me. We are called to share God's love!

The parable of the talents that Jesus told, which is found in Matthew's gospel, is a very familiar one. In fact, it is quite often used during this time of year when churches have their stewardship drives to support and fund their ministries for Christ in the coming year. This time, however, I have heard this passage quite differently.

The meaning of the word "talents" has changed with the passing of time. Originally, a talent was a Hebrew standard weight for measurement. Then, it also came to mean a significant amount of money; in today's text, a talent of money was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer. In the Middle Ages, talents were understood to mean a person's gifts or abilities; thus, we talk often about giving of one's "time, talents, and treasure." Others have proposed that by talents, Matthew was talking about a person's spiritual gifts or faith or even the gospel (the Good News of Jesus Christ). Since the word talent is open to interpretation, I would like to suggest that it represents any number of the gifts of God, and these gifts are simply expressions of God's great love to each and every one.

Now, let me be sure to say: God loves us all equally. God doesn't love some people five times as much, not even twice as much as someone else. We are all loved with the same amount of love. Christ died on the cross for all; no one received more of Christ's sacrificial love than someone else. And yet, surely it is obvious that we have differing gifts from God. Whatever talents or gifts from God we have, they are not all alike. In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul emphasized that there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. Thus, out of great love for us all, God has given gifts to all of us, but the gifts differ from one to the other.

What is the same is God's expectation that we will live up to our potential in sharing God's love. Whatever our various gifts, these expressions of God's love for us are supposed to be unwrapped and put into circulation. Out of gratitude for God's great gifts of love, we are urged to share what we have

been given with others. After all, when it comes to God's love, there is more than enough to go around and still plenty left over.

In Jesus' parable, the first two servants lived up to their potential. Through various means, they took what they had been received from the Master, and during his absence, they were able to increase the total five times over or, at the very least, double it in size. The third servant didn't fare as well. He played it safe and buried his gift in the backyard. True, he didn't lose any thing. He didn't gain any thing either, and he certainly didn't share himself or his gifts with others. Instead of being motivated by gratitude, this servant chose to operate out of fear, and so, basically he did nothing.

Along with the one gift, he received something else! When his Master returned, he received his Master's wrath for failing to do anything risky or creative at all with his gift. He had buried it deep in the ground; and, out of sight, out of circulation. That talent simply sat there in the cold, dark earth and did nothing, earned nothing. The Master took the servant to task for being so useless, unprofitable, and unproductive.

We can understand the anger of the Master better when we remember who is telling this story and why! Jesus is telling this story and he is the Master, who is going away. Before too long, he will leave Jerusalem shouldering a cross. Jesus is headed to Calvary, and, once there, he plans to give away everything he's got. With that in mind, Jesus has every right to be angry with a miserly, calculating, overly cautious servant. If he is the Master, if we dare to call him "Lord" then we had better act like him or else!

Whatever gifts we have, these manifestations of God's love for us are to be shared with others. Our gifts are not to be squirreled away and hoarded. They are to be shared. And, when we share our various expressions of God's love for us with others, then they too will know the love of God. Further more, we will experience the utter joy of gift giving, and we will understand better what it means to be created in the image of God.

For example, when we share God's love by contributing to Operation Christmas Child and filling over 30 shoeboxes with gifts that we tend to take for granted, when we put smiles on the faces of needy children in poverty stricken areas of the world as they open their own shoebox of God's love, then we are blessed greatly in return.

We can choose how we will respond to God's love. Will we hoard it or will we pass it on and share God's love with others? Will we be servants of the Master, who like to play it safe, or will we risk everything for him, who risked sin and death for our sakes? Will we live and give to only ourselves or will we share God's gifts with others, and thus exhibit the kingdom of God to the world? Will we be responsible stewards of God's love or not? Will we live up to our potential for sharing God's love or will we settle for less? Do we desire the joy of the Master or else?

Each one of us will take our God-given gifts and live out the answers to those questions. Perhaps this modern parable will help us to listen and learn from Jesus' parable: There are two seas in Palestine. One is fresh, and fish are in it. Splashes of green adorn its banks. Trees spread their branches over it, and stretch out their thirsty roots to sip of its healing waters. Along its shore the children play, as children played when he was there. He loved it. He could look across its silver surface when he spoke his parables. And on a rolling plain not far away he fed five thousand people. The river Jordan makes this sea with sparkling water from the hills. Men build their houses near to it, and birds their nests; and every kind of life is happier because it is there.

The river Jordan flows on south into another sea. Here is no splash of fish, no fluttering leaf, no song of birds, no children's laughter. Travelers choose another route, unless on urgent business. The air hangs heavy above its water, and neither man nor beast nor fowl will drink.

What makes this mighty difference in these neighbor seas? Not the river Jordan. It empties the same good water into both. Not the soil in which they lie, not the country round about. This is the difference. The Sea of Galilee receives but does not keep the Jordan. For every drop that flows into it another drop flows out. The other sea is shrewder, hoarding its income jealously. It will not be tempted into any generous impulse. Every drop it gets, it keeps. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives

nothing. It is named The Dead. There are two seas in Palestine. There are two kinds of people in the world. (Bruce Barton, Creative Ways to Worship, pages 29-30)

How do we choose to live? And, will we share God's love with others – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Randall C. Stevens

First Presbyterian Church/Martinsville, VA

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