

## *Talent Search*

November 15, 2020, Proper 28A (BCP)  
Church of the Ascension, Chicago  
The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond, Rector

Jesus said, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'" Matthew 25:14-15,19-29

All of us now know that all four of our Diocese of Chicago bishop candidates are persons of color, two women and two men. During an online conversation Friday morning, the moderator asked each candidate to share a time when our nation's ongoing scourge of racism had become personal.

One candidate, Winnie Varghese, recalled waiting at an airport gate in New York in August of 2017. She was flying to Charlottesville, Virginia, where she had been invited to take part in the now infamous Unite the Right rally, but as a witness with a different message. There at the airport gate, she suddenly recognized how many young fellow passengers wore clothes with common features—signaling that they, too, though with different intentions, were going to the rally. Winnie described it as a humanizing moment. They all looked so ... *normal*. She said, "They looked like they could be my own kids."

Yesterday I read an interview that Winnie Varghese gave after Charlottesville. She described a Friday night prayer service at St. Paul's Memorial (Episcopal) Church there. More than 1000 people crammed into the church to pray for peace with justice, to pray and sing and preach for healing and reconciliation.

And then the positive atmosphere quickly changed. She said, "*The moment when the Nazis showed up with those stupid tiki torches, it was triggering ... for the older leaders of the Civil Rights Movement .... They were scared for the safety of the group. They remembered being young and having men with torches come to their homes to kill. They felt that no one was going to protect them.*"<sup>1</sup>

All of this may seem far removed from Jerusalem and 2000 years ago and the parable that Jesus serves up in today's appointed gospel. But our view of the parable expands by knowing that it is among the very last public teachings of Jesus. Only a dozen verses later, Jesus will privately say to his disciples, "... *the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified..*" He may as well have said, "*They are coming with their torches.*" And "Then," Matthew continues, "*the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered ... and ... conspired to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him.*"<sup>2</sup>

Jesus tells today's parable as he anticipates his betrayal, suffering and death, emblematic of all that is wrong and unjust and violent in the world. And all that is wrong with the world continues, within, around and beyond us, in an endless array of moments – in Charlottesville, and on stages as big and public as the world and as small and private as my own household, my own checkbook, my own calendar, my own words, or silences, and my own choices.

On the face of it, today's parable describes how three different beneficiaries handle the talents that have been given them. The currency here is money, but we don't need a Bible scholar to tell us that there's more going on here. These three stewards are stand-ins for all of us. The talents encompass all that has been given to us: material blessings, yes, but also our optimism or perseverance, our skills with music or numbers or words, our wisdom, our privileges.

It's only a matter of time before the One who gave the talents will return to learn what we've done with our time and lives and choices. How many voices in how many ways for how many millennia have urged prudent investment of our lives in light of the brevity of time? Nobel laureate Wislawa Szymborska, as example, opens her poem 'Nothing Twice' as follows:

*Nothing can ever happen twice.  
In consequence, the sorry fact is  
that we arrive here improvised  
and leave without the chance to practice.*

*Even if there is no one dumber,  
if you're the planet's biggest dunce,  
you can't repeat the class in summer:  
this course is only offered once.<sup>2</sup>*

Mother Winnie Varghese's Charlottesville story led me to wonder about my own devotion to any meaningful greater good. Prompted by today's parable, I might ask: *Is God receiving a worthy return on all that has been given and entrusted to me? How much have I buried in the ground? Do I believe I have more time than God may in fact give me? Do I imagine that I can take the life investment class over again?*

Add to this our endless human rationalizations and excuses and our genuinely complex decisions. In the interview I read yesterday, Winnie Varghese recalled all of the reasons why, beforehand, she thought she couldn't go to Charlottesville: "... I was getting back from [a mission trip with] a large group ... I had to get kids ready to go off to college ... I had a vacation planned ..." And what are our litanies? What are the competing interests and obstacles that get in the way of our most spiritually prosperous actions? Could we make a list? Or are our rationalizations so habitual or embarrassing or painful that they are hiding from our view, but likely not from God's view?

And then, of course, there's fear. The third slave in today's parable plainly admits that he was driven by fear. "I knew that you were a harsh man .... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Nothing in the parable suggests that this fear was unfounded. Even so, the third slave's fear did not pardon him from accountability for what had been entrusted to him. And what of our fears? How do they hold us back? When and how do we cite our fears to give ourselves a pass on doing the right thing?

Winnie Varghese only decided to go to Charlottesville after she received an invitation. It came from the people of St. Paul's Church there, to help with that Friday night prayer service. "Without the personal invitation," she said, "I don't think I would have been there."

The quality of invitation could arguably be attributed to the distribution of talents at the start of today's parable. To be sure, these are not Yes or No invitations. By the end we know that Yes is the only viable answer. We may know what those invitations are like. God seems to specialize in them. We may have received some recently. Or, I should say, we likely have, if

we've been paying attention. Some may have been written out in black and white. Others are implicit in the circumstances of our lives or arise from our prayers. Some come with that nagging sense that God specifically intends them for us and is expecting our Yes. What fears and other excuses are keeping our talents in the ground? *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> From an interview by Bill Campbell of the Episcopal Church Foundation, posted to an undated blog by *Forma*, a ministry of the Episcopal Church Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> From *Map: Collected and Last Poems*, Wistawa Szymborska, Mariner Books, 2015, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:2b,3a,4, NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> *Op Cit*, *Forma*.

