

USE IT OR LOSE IT

I've always been intrigued by this parable of Jesus about the talents, which comes up in our lectionary readings every three years, conveniently during stewardship season. For one thing, this parable seems so counter-intuitive – “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.”

It's sort of like Robin Hood in reverse – take from the poor and give to the rich. Or like the political struggle over taxes going on in Congress right now. But don't worry – this is not a political sermon!

And it's not a sermon about the five-talent person, or about the one-talent person. Few of us are five-talent people. Few of us are one-talent people. Most of us are two-talent people, all those people in the middle who are so often forgotten .

How wrong we are as two-talent people to believe that because you and I are not as gifted as five-talent people, that God has no purpose for us. It was Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes who said, “Alas for those who never sing, but die with all their music in them.”

Let me tell you about Claude. Claude was a priest we knew in Hawaii. Claude was an alcoholic, a drunk, and behaved so badly that the bishop had to inhibit him from acting as a priest. As we used to say, Claude was put in the penalty box.

On his 58th birthday, Claude was sitting outside a storefront in Honolulu's Chinatown when he decided to start a conversation with homeless individuals by offering them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and coffee.

As someone who had experienced alcoholism and depression himself, Claude wanted to do something positive. He knew that people wanting help could only achieve progress by working through it together, as a community. And the homeless loved the PB&Js!

The “Peanut Butter Ministry”, as it became known, grew. With the help of Hawaii community organizations, the faith-based community and government, Claude opened a drop-in center in a run-down area of Honolulu. He called it IHS, the Institute for Human Services,

playing on the IHS monogram for Jesus Christ. In 1982 IHS was incorporated as a 501c3, private, non-profit agency.

IHS changed locations frequently after opening its first drop-in center. In 1986 the Mayor built a new building for IHS to provide shelter, meals and other services, for up to 300 men, woman or families a night. Public support grew, and soon churches, businesses and restaurants began taking turns to cook and serve an average of 4000 meals a week.

In 1990 Claude retired and moved to Texas, where he died in 1997. There was a time in his life when Claude could have been called a loser. But he achieved so much while battling alcoholism, depression, and later complications due to Parkinson's Disease. With strong community and government support, IHS went on to fulfill Claude's vision of opening a separate shelter that solely served women and families with children. Today IHS has expanded to providing fully integrated homeless services, including case management, housing, employment, and two health and wellness centers at two different shelters. They have expanded to the North Shore of Oahu, as well as into Waikiki, and in partnership with two of Hawaii's major hospitals have expanded their shelter options to include medical respite homes for medically frail homeless.

All this from a down and out ex-priest who started giving out peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Just a two-talent person, like most of us.

Then there's Pete, who was a parishioner at St. Aidan's. A delightful person, but a real pot-disturber! Pete came to the Vestry one evening and said that since we asked members of the congregation to pledge 10% to the church, we as a church should pledge 10% of our budget to outreach. The Vestry gulped, said we couldn't possibly afford it, but before long they took the leap of faith and decided to do it. They formed a Community Ministries Board and gave them 10% of the church budget to give away to outreach. That was back in the 80s, and they're still doing it. It's one of the great strengths of that small congregation.

Robby was a 15-year-old who was kicked out of school, whose family came to St. Stephen's Church in Portland. Portland had a number of feeding programs during the week, but nothing on Saturdays. One day Robby said, "Hey, Mom, how come there aren't

any places for the hungry to eat on Saturday?” So Robby and his parents started feeding breakfast at the church. Donations poured in as fast as the people, and soon there were 100 people lining up to get a delicious hot breakfast every Saturday morning.

Several of the senior members of the congregation decided they wouldn't be outdone, and started a Thursday chili lunch, and before long the parish hall was full every Thursday noon. Then some others in the parish started a sandwich ministry.

Maggie had a family inheritance, and fifty years ago bought a worthless piece of property in Dubois, Wyoming, useless for grazing or growing but with some amazing petroglyphs. Maggie started a retreat center, which has grown until today hundreds of people every summer come for a spiritual retreat in the wilderness.

There are thousands of these stories out there. Here at St. Mary's we've seen what one individual can do to help immigrants, promote a feeding program, educate our kids, build a vibrant music program, help Edward II get started and assist the many outreach ministries we support. And on and on and on.

It's easy to look around at all the massive problems of the world and feel overwhelmed, because we think we aren't in a position politically or economically or spiritually to make much impact. But God wants us to do something. God wants each of us to do something, and the combined talents of all of us two-talent persons will far exceed the few giants with five talents. God wants us to look around us, at the broken world around us, and see opportunities there for healing and hope and new life.

Maybe the opportunity for you to use your two talents is in a renewed commitment to your family. Maybe it's in a gesture of love to someone who's hurting physically or spiritually. Maybe it's in listening, or serving, or forgiving. Especially forgiving. Is there someone you need to forgive? Maybe it's in writing a letter to your Congressperson about some issue you feel deeply about. Maybe it's in inviting someone to come to church with you. How many opportunities there are for all of us two-talent people to help heal this world of ours and make it a better place. Even if it's only picking up trash along the way.

We're called to live in hope, not in anxiety; in love, not in fear. We're called to know the talents we've received, big or little, and to use them in God's service. “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.”

Or in simple words -- Use it or lose it.