

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time: Giving Back to the Lord

This week's Gospel contains the parable of the talents. It is another one of those parables that catches us off guard. It leads us to ask, "So what's wrong with that?" It's the same reaction we have when we read heard about the elder son in the parable usually referred to as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The elder son seems to be justifiably upset with his younger brother and with his father for welcoming him back. "Well, that's reasonable we would say," but the parable and the Lord through it says, "No it is not the way of the Lord to hold grudges."

Today's parable elicits the same reaction we might have had when we heard about the laborers in the vineyard who worked all day and were paid the same as those who only worked a few hours. They seem to be justifiably upset. So what's wrong with that? "Well," the Lord says, "It is not up to us to decide how the Lord is to distribute his mercy."

In today's parable the third man entrusted with a great sum of money turned it all back to the Master. For this he is berated. Our reaction is, "So, what did he do that was so wrong?" Well, to answer this we have to consider the first words of the parable. The Master who was going on the journey handed everything he had over to his three servants. He didn't give his servants just a little cash to tide them over until he returned. He gave everything he had over to them. When he returned, he expected that his servants would respond by giving their best back to him. The first two did. The third gave nothing of himself back to the Master.

Obviously the Master is God who is extravagant with his people. He gives his life to us, all his love, all whom he is. He does this freely, generously, and without reserve. The third servant missed this. He took the money as a risk rather than as a gift. When the Master returned he said, "Here's everything back, safe and sound." That is not what the Master wanted. The Master wanted the servant to be generous with him just as he had been generous to the servant. God gave himself as a gift to us. We are to give ourselves as a gift to others. Jesus put this another way, "The one who saves his life will lose it. The one who loses his life will save it." Everything we have is a gift. Our lives, in turn must be a gift to others.

Perhaps a better way to understand the parable is through a story I came upon in preparing this homily.

A young woman in a small town gave birth to her first child, a boy, just one month after her husband died in a tragic car accident. The neighbors, deeply concerned, held a baby shower for her. Each person went way out of their way to

bring the most beautiful presents for the young Mom. The small town pulled together and pledged that they would all be her child's parents. Towards the conclusion of the party the mother announced that she would name the child Victor, after his father, and would have him baptized the next Sunday.

After everyone had left, the young woman heard a knock on her back door. It was the old man who lived in the corner house by himself. People hardly saw him, but they knew he was a good man. Some said he spent his days in prayer. When people heard that he had taught in a university earlier in his life they began calling him Doc, Doc Burns.

"I have come to give you a gift for your new son," said Doc Burns. "But mine is a different sort of gift. I have come to offer you one wish for your young Victor. You must make this wish before the child is baptized this Sunday, and I will pray throughout my life that the wish be granted."

Well, the young mother thought about it all week. When she brought the baby to the Church for the baptism there was Doc Burns in one of the pews. She walked over to him and whispered, "I wish that everyone in the world would love my Victor."

Doc Burns nodded his assent. And the wish came true. Everybody loved Victor. As a toddler, everyone in the town hugged him and touched him. Even when he was naughty, they could not believe that Victor could do anything wrong. As he grew older, even the other children in the town gave Victor toys and clothes. Whenever his mother scolded or punished him, the other adults would say, "You are being too harsh on such a wonderful child." Victor grew up conceited and even nasty. Still people loved him. He would listen to no one, except Doc Burns, who made it a point to demand that Victor visit him.

When Victor graduated high school he was given a scholarship to a college far away. At Christmas, he returned home in a large Cadillac. He had beautiful new clothes, and plenty of spending money. It seem that some of the financial backers of the college met Victor, loved him and were very generous to him.

Victor hardly saw his mother at all that first vacation home. He spent all his time partying with friends. After college Victor hardly worked. Somehow or other, he got away with everything and lived a life of ease. There was nothing he didn't indulge in, no vice he didn't practice. Women smothered him with attention. Friends raved about him. But his heart grew empty, and his soul became sick. He became disgusted with everyone and everything.

One night Victor decided to commit suicide. He withdrew into his bedroom, filled a glass with poison and was about to drink it, when there was a knock on his door. It was Doc Burns. "It's been a long time since I've seen you, Victor. You seem to be distressed. What is the matter."

"My life stinks," said Victor. I have stuff and people who say they love me, but I am empty inside. I don't love anyone. I don't know if I can love anyone."

Then Doc Burns said, "Many years ago I asked your mother to make a wish for you on the day of your baptism. She asked me to pray that everyone would love you. Perhaps it wasn't the best wish. Would you like to make a different one, and I will pray for it to come true."

"Yes," said Victor through tears. "I wish I could love everyone."

"I will pray that this wish be granted. If it is things will go better for you, Victor," said wise old Doc Burns. And things did get better, but not immediately. Without his charm, people began to abandon Victor. Several people began to retaliate for past wrongs they had suffered from him. Eventually, he was thrown into jail for three months. No one visited him. When he was released he was sick, lonely and penniless. He returned home to take care of his ailing mother. For the first time, she experienced her son's love.

After his recovery, Victor took a job as a janitor in the local elementary school. He cared for the floors and he cared for children, especially those from the poorer families. They all called him, "Mr. Victor," their friend.

One day Victor was watching one of the children who was being picked up by her mother, a young widow. "Why don't you two go out, I need a Daddy," the child said with the tact of a nine year old. Well, once they recovered from the embarrassment Victor and the lady did begin to date and eventually they married. Victor gave them the love that they so desperately needed.

Eventually, Victor realized that he was one of the richest men in the world. He realized that it was in loving, not in being loved that life comes to its fullest expression.

A Master went on a journey and gave his all to three servants. Two returned their all back to him and prospered. The third did not respond with the gift of love. He tried to hoard the Master's gift. He ended up with nothing.

Victor's life changed radically when he stopped being concerned with what he

was given and started giving his love freely and generously.

We call ourselves Christians because we are followers of Jesus Christ. He gave everything he has, all of himself to us. He gives us love. He calls us to be loving. We Christians are called to love. We have been taught how to love by the Tremendous Lover. Now we are called to love as he loved: totally, completely, without counting the cost. This is the sacrificial love that is the love of Christ.

Can we love this way? Can we love as Jesus loved?

Yes we can. He has given us this talent.