



Small Things with Great Love

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, November 16, 2008*

Matthew 25:14–30:

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven will be as when 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. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

A couple of weeks ago I went to the Jesuit Retreat Center about an hour and a half west of here in Wernersville—for a few days of silent prayer and a chance to write. I happened to be there on the feast day of a saint whom I had never heard of: St. Alphonsus Rodriguez. The priests in the Society of Jesus are a very scholarly and accomplished lot. So most of the saints are of heroic stature—someone who’s written 44 volumes of theology and poetry in seven languages, or another who went to distant shores and baptized 200,000 souls. . . .

Not so with Alphonsus Rodriguez. Born in 1532 in Segovia, Spain, he entered a local Jesuit school, but he had to leave when he was 12-years-old because his father died and he had to take over the family business as a wool merchant.

He married at the age of 20 and they had three children. When the plague swept through the land 7 or 8 years later, his wife and all three children died of it. With the loss of so many lives came the loss of his business as well.

Broken, devastated and bewildered, Alphonsus spent several years living alone on scraps, just praying to God, asking God to show him what to do. During his prayers, Alphonsus heard God tell him that God wanted him to be a priest, to be a Jesuit priest.

So he went and presented himself to the novice master. But the novice master rejected him. He was too old (by now he was 35); he didn’t have a good enough education; and besides he was in lousy health.

Disappointed, he went away and prayed some more. Again God said, “I want you to be a priest.” So Alphonsus thought, I can’t do anything about my age, but I can go back to school and I can try to take care of my health. He did. Then he returned to the novice master and presented himself once more. A second time, he was told no.

So he prayed some more. Again God said, “I want you to be a priest.” What to do? This time, when Alphonsus went back to the Jesuits, he went straight to the top. Instead of the novice master, he presented himself to the Provincial. He told the Provincial all that had happened, and what God had told him. The Provincial thought, “yes, I believe God wants you to be a priest.”

But the Provincial sent him to a tiny island—Majorca—to a high school. It was called a collegio, but really a high school. There he was put in the lowest place, as the porter at the gate—the one who answered the door, the one who was on the edge of the community, closest to the world. Everyone in the collegio knew he was in the lowest place, and everyone in the town around knew he had been put in the lowest place.

Day and night, Alphonsus had to deal with whoever showed up, asking for help or for handouts, often the riff-raff or the thieves. But Alphonsus threw himself into it, and a funny thing happened—people began to want to go visit the porter. Why? Because he listened to people, really listened to what they had to say. He cared about people. People said he seemed to shine or glow—with love.

Long after he died, his journal was found, and what was written there revealed that Alphonsus was a divine mystic of the highest order, a holy man of God.

All day he sat at the gate—for 46 years—a doorman. And when he heard a knock (knock! knock!), he always replied, “Coming Lord.” For he knew—whether it was a bishop or a beggar—it was indeed the Lord God.

Often we think we need to do great things. I aspire to do great things. But as another saint, St. Theresa of Calcutta has said, “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.”

Alphonsus was a doorman, a very small job in the eyes of the world, but he did that job with great love. And that made all the difference.

To one, the landowner gave five talents; to another, two talents; to the third, one talent. One talent was the equivalent of more than 15 years’ wages so each received a very large sum. Those who invested wisely and received a good return were rewarded; the one filled with fear who merely held in safety the talent he had received was punished.

Presented in harsh words demanding accountability, the message is one of good stewardship: we are entrusted with gifts of great worth. We are to use them wisely and well and return them in time to their rightful owner. The wealth, the gifts, the talents, did not originate with us but are entrusted to our stewardship and care. The parable is rich with wise counsel: to take risks with what has been given to us, putting those gifts to use. In so doing, to face and overcome hesitation or fear that may inhibit our acting. It calls for decisiveness and full commitment.

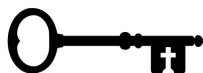
And what are the talents and gifts we are to use? Have you discerned the unique gifts that have been entrusted to you? This is part of our spiritual work—to discern those gifts. The sainted Alphonsus had gifts of listening, empathy and—one might say—perseverance. I have come to see that one of my gifts is that of explorer; I am drawn to the unknown. The territory to be explored may be as exotic as a foreign land or a foreign faith, or it may be a sermon topic: I set off with an idea, perhaps a guiding star, and make my way into the unknown. With what gifts have you been entrusted? Do not bury them until the end, rather invest them in ways that they will increase and grow. All of us have or will be making decisions about our financial pledge to St. Peter’s for next year. I hope that that decision provides you with an opportunity to see even your hard-earned wealth as a gift—a gift with which we’ve been entrusted to invest wisely and to return with thanks to God who gives all good things.

Sometimes our gifts feel pretty paltry. Sometimes the world does not regard them as of great value. Sometimes we suffer a great loss. This is a tough time and there’s going to be tough times ahead. I know several people looking for work, an old friend who at 50 has lost his job and has little prospect of finding something comparable. St. Peter’s has been blessed with gifts from those who have gone before creating an endowment which this past summer consisted of \$4.5 million. Like most portfolios, we’ve lost nearly one-third of that amount in the last couple of months. The fear of scarcity is very real, and our first response to fear and scarcity is to turn in, to circle the wagons and cling tight to what we do have.

You may have heard me share one interpretation of the feeding of the 5000. In John’s Gospel, a young boy is the one who brings forward the five loaves and two fish, but as Peter asks, “what are these among so many people?” The chances are most of the people gathered on that hillside, like the boy, had a little something with them, a bit of food tucked away for just such an emergency. The miracle was not that Jesus cloned bread and fish; the miracle was that in the presence of Jesus, the people saw that it was safe and good to bring forth their own modest gifts—hardly enough for a meal, yet when shared with others, an abundance for all. They all ate, as much as they wanted, and the fragments of bread gathered at the end filled twelve baskets.

I went out to that Jesuit Retreat Center when I did to hear a particular teacher, a teacher who is both a Jesuit Priest and a Zen Buddhist Roshi (or master)—right up my alley. Some of the people who regularly sit in Zen meditation with Father Kennedy accompanied him. I learned that in the *zendo*, the Zen meditation hall, they place their meditation mats close to one another. They do this because they recognize how necessary it is to support the others who are with them on the Way, and to have the support of those others for themselves.

In the Christian initiation rites of baptism and confirmation, we are asked, “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?” And each of us, for the other, responds, “We will.” We will be here for one another. We are each called upon to be good stewards of the special gifts with which we have been entrusted. And we need one another; we need to support one another, to encourage and embolden one another, especially in times of scarcity and fear, so that none of us merely bury our talents. For when we share our talents there is a feast abundance for all, and many baskets filled for those still to come. No great things, perhaps, but small things with great love. It makes all the difference.



Open hearts. Open minds.