

Sunday, January 19, 2020

Parable of the Talents

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The Pastor came to a Sunday School Class, and began teaching by describing that on the way to Church she saw a very busy animal scurrying back and forth, gathering nuts in their cheeks to hide inside a tree. The animal had a furry tail and short legs, and periodically would rise up on its hind legs to look around. After a long pause, one of the children raised their hand to say, "Pastor, that sure sounds like a squirrel, but this is Sunday School, so I am going to say it was Jesus!"

Our assumptions are important. To take this parable at face value, this is a parable about the Virtues of Capitalism and Productivity, the Moral: WORK HARD! DO NOT TOLLERATE LAZINESS! But that does not sound very Biblical. That kind of Prosperity Gospel reading says if you work hard you will be rewarded; the more you have the more you receive; while the poor will have even the little they have confiscated. ALSO There is a Problem as we know from other parables that when there is a King, a land owner, a man going on a journey = it is about God.

For a time I served as President of a program called (IDEA) International Design for Economic Awareness. Common-folk like all of us, travelled to a third-world country, where we discovered that by American Standards as Teachers, Nurses, Farmers, Business Managers were very Middle Class, but by the world's standards we were very rich.

Then on one mission, suddenly I recognized "I was the rich man going on a long journey".

Mission can be so many different things, and often inter-related. I have a dear love for Campus Ministry because in the mid-1960s the University of Michigan made a decision to dissolve their Dean of Students Office. Instead my father was one of a group of Doctoral Students who were Ministers, Rabbis, Priests and Imams, called the Office of Ethics and Religion. Instead of an Administrative Dean these Chaplains provided counseling for all the students.

For the last four years, I was elected to serve on the GA:PJC. The Church, just like our Government has an Appellate Court System. When you disagree with the decision of the Session, it can be appealed to the Presbytery, then to the Synod, and finally to the General Assembly, where 8 Ministers and 8 Elders heard the case and wrote a Decision... Except our purpose could not be Jail time, or Financial, as Church Court our role was to discover the Truth and try to restore Trust where it was broken. My favorite Case was of a Church, where the Hand Bell Choir Director caused such problems, she was fired on the 23rd of December, right before the Christmas Eve services. She appealed this over and over, and reading the Case, it seemed apparent: She was a problem, she was fired for cause. But we had a Trial, and in the trial what we heard in her testimony was that she had never felt heard, all she wanted was to tell her story so we listened and heard her. Hearing each other, validating their story, validating their life is Mission.

In 2001, we sponsored "Lost Boys from S.Sudan". After 4 years, one of the Refugees came to me stating that after 40 years, their Civil War was ending due to U. S. intervention. He asked: We need someone to go for us to find our families, to prove that we did not die." 6 weeks later, I was on a plane solo into a warzone. I was told there were no stores or banks or ATMs, and you could not write a check or use credit cards. I had \$20,000 that I had been given by people in America and I had donated, for this trip, so

I hid this in my shoes and taped it to my body if \$20, \$50 and \$100 bills. Where every man, woman and older child carried a Machete or an AK47, and I had a black shirt with collar in 120 degree heat; but, while I became deathly ill from dehydration, I had the privilege of never being threatened.

I flew by commercial airlines to the border between Kenya and Sudan, really just an air strip where I chartered a single engine plane for the next morning for the pilot to take me to the GPS Coordinates for what had once been the Refugee's village of Duk Payuel. In the morning, the woman who booked the plane, showed me a cardboard box. She described that they coordinated all Missionaries in Africa and support for the indigenous people. For 40 years they had been unable to pay their staff in South Sudan because of the war. But as an American minister, I could be trusted, so would I take this \$3,000,000?

I was able to re-unite over 100 families with their sons and daughters! One of the refugees we had sponsored turned out to be the son of the Chief and Nephew of the Paramount Chief of the Dinka, the largest Tribe in South Sudan. We spoke of our plans to build a basic Clinic in the Village. The Paramount Chief said *"What you are offering is a great thing. If you do this, you and all to whom you tell this story will live a long and happy life. But throughout our lives we have been lied to again and again. If you are lying, you and all whom you tell this will die a painful and shameful death!"*

The Chiefs, were my hosts in the Village. When travelling, we often take gifts for our host, so I gave them \$1,000 describing this was not a consumable like dinner last night, this was for something special to change lives. They were visibly moved and departed to talk.

Then the local Anglican priest came to me, stating that he had his own mission project. He wanted their Church to own 5 pair of Oxen and Plows, because people were on their hands and knees poking their finger into the soil to plant a seed, one at a time, where plows could cultivate whole fields. This is a Dowry Culture where every time a man marries he pays 130 cows to the Bride's father, and a Polygamous Culture, so there were a lot of cows. But the priest said using Dowry cows for plowing would be like harnessing your wife to a plow. So I gave the Deacon named, Elijah \$3,000.

That evening a Colonel in the Sudanese People's Liberation Army and I went for a walk, suddenly I felt his Machete between my legs, as he said *"What I would like to do, is to cut you open from here to your throat, and fill your body with babies to send to America, because it is the only chance they have."* Then he laughed saying, *"But you do not do that to a friend!"* I realized just how serious all of this was.

The next day, I was told by the Chief's family that in fact they had another son, who had run away to Nairobi where he got into trouble, and this money would pay his fine to be released from prison to return home and start a business.

At the end of 2 weeks I was to return home, when a woman grabbed my arm, and the translator described *"She wants something from America to prove you will return"*. All I had left was a \$5 bill so I gave this to her. As I flew home to America, it occurred to me that I had been the rich man going on a long journey, from the parable, who gave one \$3,000 and another \$1,000 and another \$5.

Over the next two years, contractors from the Church volunteered that *"If Craig could go, they could go build the first Clinic in South Sudan"*. One was a 77 year old, whom I questioned his going, and he replied, *I have an education as a Ceramic Engineer, I am one of the few who can pour an 8" slab of concrete on sand in 120 degree heat and not have it crack"*, as it turned out he was the only one who never got sick.

Two years later I was contacted by the Profesor of Infectious Disease at a Medical College. Glenn described that he took Medical Students on Mission Trips to prove you do not have to have an MRI and

CAT Scan to do medicine. 1) Could he take students to our Clinic and 2) would I go along as a Chaperone because people there knew me. I thought wonderful, I get to see and dedicate the Clinic. But as we prepared to leave, the Professor described we had all just become Medical Residents and would be treating patients. I said Whoa! And he described that he would be right down the hall, and each of us would have both a Translator and a Nurse with us. So for the next two weeks, I literally played doctor, diagnosing and treating diseases, assisting in surgery, suturing up a wound, even OB exams.

During this 2 weeks, I met the Prodigal Son of the Chiefs, who not only returned home from Prison, but had developed a Trucking Company which provided the trucks and machinery for building the Clinic, AND he presented me a Bill for Rental of his equipment.

One day we were in a remote Village when a man came up stating he was Elisha who managed the Ox Plowing Co-op. He described that the work had proved too hard for Elijah, so he found Elisha to continue the work for him. And indeed the oxen and plows were used to plow fields and grow crops.

One evening, that woman found me and took me to her hut, where beside where she slept, she dug in the ground removing this snail shell, inside of which was my \$5 bill.

At that time in South Sudan, every pregnancy was 50/50 whether the mother lived or died; 80% of children died before 5 years; and now both of those are controlled. That first Clinic has grown into 14 and we now provide Medical Care, especially Labor and Delivery, and Malnutrition feeding to 750,000 patients per year. We also have Eye Surgeons from Utah, who are able to restore sight to the blind.

But The truth of the matter is supporting Missions in Africa is sexy, while missions right outside our door, helping in our own and neighbor communities, these are where the hard work occurs.

Valley Church has 15 amazing involvements in Mission, on top of support of the Rice's in South Sudan and the Lovett's in the Middle East; and financial support of Presbyterian Mission Causes. We sew quilts, knit prayer shawls, support Campus Ministry baring down at U of Arizona; we support Crossroads Mission and ST. Andrew's Children's Clinic both in Nogales; the Community Food Bank; Posada Community Services; Hands of a Friend Domestic Violence Shelter; Youth On Their Own for Homeless Teens.

Truth be told, I have been bragging about you to colleagues around the country. "Imagine instead of Oxen, your Church owned its own Moving Van with a Crew, such that when people have a local move, a death in the family, or are simply moving to assisted care (regardless of whether they are members of the church or not) they could call the Church and be moved for free; and any of the belongings they are willing to donate, are then sold for additional mission funding!

AND we not only have a Church Cook Book, we also have a Meal Trailer, with volunteers who Cater community events, raising funds for Missions.

One friend responded "Just like in the Book of Acts, the Disciples were carrying out the MISSION of Jesus Christ, waiting Tables, praying and caring for people in Need".