

Epiphany 5A 2023

Do not put your light under a basket, Jesus tells those gathered around the mount to hear him.

Why does Jesus place so much emphasis on our gifts that he includes his discussion of them near the beginning of his sermon, right after the beatitudes?

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”

Jesus is telling them that we have a purpose here.

Like salt, which is both necessary for life and makes food more enjoyable, we have the ability to give life to others and to enjoy the results.

If we do not use our gifts, on the other hand, we become useless, like salt that has lost its taste.

Sharing our gifts is at the heart of the gospel, which is about building relationships and building one another up in order to grow the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus therefore encourages us not to hide our gifts, but to let them be known and to use them to invigorate the whole community, just as a little salt makes the whole dish better.

We seek to share our gifts, in other words, not only within our immediate community, but to reach out into the greater community, so that St. James is the kind of place that nurtures the whole community—a light on the hill, a beacon of love and integrity ready to support anyone on his or her path to God.

This becomes more challenging when we hide our gifts.

One reason we may not recognize our own gifts is that, in our society, we are encouraged to think only in terms of those abilities that can be monetized.

We therefore tend to overlook things that have no obvious marketability.

Though spiritual gifts are not always obvious breadwinners, they make life both easier and more meaningful for the giver and the recipient.

I have a colleague who recently shared a spiritual gift assessment that listed gifts under four categories: partnering with others, partnering with oneself, partnering with the beyond, and partnering with communities.

Among the gifts included were such things as apologizing, affirming others, hurrying up for others, slowing down for others, playing, exercising, resting, singing, swimming, giving, crying, blessing, leading, following, four types of prayer, and many, many more abilities.

I suspect that gifts are as varied as we are and that we can only create partial lists of potential gifts, but the assessment form was a good start.

Though many of the gifts listed would not be impressive on a resume (try telling your potential employer that you are good at resting or playing), they contribute to the most important aspects of life.

If you don't believe me, try *never* resting or *never* playing.

These things make well being possible, they make relationships possible, compassion possible, community possible, but only when we do not deny them, hide them.

We cannot partner well with others, for example, if we cannot do some of the things on the list like speaking the truth, hugging, waiting, or listening.

No one gets all of the gifts—some are terrible at hugging, which is fine as they have other gifts—but we need to use what gifts we *do* have in order to work well with others and build the kingdom.

Similarly, we cannot partner well with ourselves if we do not rely on gifts like affirming oneself, dancing alone, or sharing feelings.

I am certainly not good at dancing alone, or at all, but I use what gifts I *do* have.

We cannot partner well with the beyond if we do not use our gift of seeing, or piety, or chanting, or teaching, or something else.

We cannot partner well with community, something we want to improve here at St.

James, if we do not rely on visioning, building, celebrating, cooking, or some other gifts.

When we use our gifts, we build the kingdom of heaven, which means building a community in which people truly can thrive, can be themselves before God and others without fear or shame.

It sets us free to dance with God, each in one's own way.

Everyone has a different relationship with God.

The important thing is that it be sincere.

You may have heard of Teresa of Avila, the nun, mystic, and religious reformer from the sixteenth century.

She and God were very close because Teresa held nothing back, hid nothing.

She related to God in the fullness of her own personality, which was fiery.

As related in a book of formation for the third order of St. Francis, "Teresa . . . engaged in constant conversation with God. When she fell in a creek after a hard day, she shouted, "After everything else, now this!" God, her constant companion, responded with disarming humor, "That is how I treat my friends." "Then no

wonder you have so few!” cried the furious Teresa.”¹

This is an honest, somewhat tense, yet also playful exchange between Teresa and God, who have a deeply trusting relationship.

Neither have to pretend or to hide feelings from the other.

They are confident in one another’s love, which allows them to say what is on their minds, even the frustrating things.

God is always open to such a relationship, but I hope that you also have a friend or spouse whose love you trust so fully that you are unafraid to be wholly yourself, to admit to anything, to share your feelings.

Actually, this has always been my model for clergy—someone with whom one can discuss absolutely anything and trust that he or she will not reject anyone, someone whom one can anticipate being humble and understanding.

I think few people see clergy this way, but we are *all* powerless to control how people think or react to us.

We must merely remain open.

Similarly, God is waiting for us at all times with love, like the parent who keeps the light on.

¹ Martin, p. 98, cited in *Forming the Life of a Tertiary*.

It is up to us to walk through the door.

We cannot share our gifts and grow in community with others if we cannot be ourselves.

Jesus knows that our relationship with God is one of play more than work.

Like children, we try things out.

When our playmates get agitated, we try something else, but there is no guilt about
having tried the first thing.

We just adapt and move on.

How can we play fully if we are hiding who we are, if we live in fear?

In his sermon, Jesus is telling us to be wholly ourselves.

Teresa was spicy, and God loved her for it.

You may be something else, but be that fully.

The church strives to provide a setting where this can happen.

It is not a museum for saints, but a place for real people to learn and to grow and to
thrive.