

November 19th, 2023

Matthew 25:14-30 “Heavenly Economics”

When I moved from Oregon to Tennessee back in 1991, I experienced quite a bit of culture shock. Things are different in that part of the world than they are here. For example - I know some of you like to think you're football fans. And you are. I'm not here to dispute that. But football fans operate on a whole different level east of the Rockies. It borders on being a religion in some parts of the country, especially the south. But football pales in comparison to the phenomenon that is NASCAR. That, my friends, is a tried-and-true religion with the most loyal and devoted disciples you'll ever see. Stock car racing started on the beaches of Florida in the 1930s when moonshiners gathered to race their souped-up cars. By the 1950s it evolved into the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing, or NASCAR. Now it's a multi-billion-dollar coast-to-coast industry. I tried to appreciate this sport, but it just doesn't make sense to me. Half the time it doesn't even seem fair. Unlike foot races at a typical track meet or a horse race, NASCAR competitors can't all fit on a starting line. The track just isn't wide enough. That means, some cars get to start at the front while the rest start at varying distances behind the line. The further back they start, the greater the disadvantage. This means they have to have a system for deciding where racers start. NASCAR racers have time trials a few days before the race, and whoever clocks in the fastest gets to start at the front in what's called the “pole

position.” Whoever is slowest starts at the back. Most of the time, you already have a good idea about who’s most likely to win because they’ve already proven themselves to be the fastest at the time trials. What supposedly makes NASCAR fun is seeing if your favorite driver can catch up to the racers who started on the line. Most of the time you need a few well-placed wrecks for that to happen. What makes NASCAR sort of weird is that fans are sorely disappointed when there are no wrecks. I think this is why I never got into NASCAR. Fans basically sit out in the heat and humidity of the southeastern United States drinking awful beer and watching cars circle around a track for anywhere between 150 and 600 laps while hoping that someone gets into a fiery wreck so that their favorite driver can win.

This isn’t the only kind of race that uses time trials to determine who gets “pole position.” This is how it works at the Boston Marathon and other similar foot races except spectators don’t typically hope that someone falls and gets injured so their favorite runner can win. There’s something about this system that just doesn’t seem fair. The advantage always goes to those who are most likely to win anyway. Australians have a different way of doing things though, at least in some foot races. The Stawell Gift is Australia’s oldest short-distance foot race competition. It is the main event in an annual Easter carnival held at the Stawell Athletic Club in western Victoria. The races are designed for men and women of all ages and abilities and range from distances between 230 feet to a little less than 2 miles. Here’s what’s different

though. Competitors are handicapped according to their form, which is sort of like a time trial. Each competitor is marked somewhere between 0 m and 10 m or more to theoretically reach the finish line at the same time. The winner is, hypothetically, the runner who can best rise to the occasion and perform better than their previous form. The problem is, one of the strategies competitors use is to perform slightly below their best in the forms so they can receive a favorable handicap. This doesn't seem fair either does it? This system seems to penalize racers who've trained hard to be the likely winners.

When you consider how churches work, it's not hard to feel like there's a similar system at play. Some churches seem to have a huge head start over the rest. They have people and property and resources, and they always seem to be getting more. No matter how you measure it, they seem to be getting it all. They have multiple ministers on staff, multiple musicians, administrators, youth, youth leaders and the best equipment and technology to make it all work. Everything you think a church ought to have to be successful, they've got plenty. And then you go to another church, and there's folks who are on the verge of burnout because they've been doing the same jobs for years. Families with children have either moved out of town to find work, or they've moved on to other churches with bigger children or youth programs. Maybe the church has resorted to using recorded music because there's no one left who can play. Maybe they can't afford a full-time pastor because there's not enough offerings

coming in. Maybe they can't even collect enough money to fix a broken hinge on the back door. Now some of this is, of course, simple demographics. You can get a map of the population shifts of a particular area and predict where churches will thrive and grow. The ones most likely to succeed are close to new housing developments in the suburbs where young couples are settling to raise families. Honestly, you could probably grow a decent-sized church in a place like that with a handful of wealthy benefactors and a few clergy with mail-order ordination certificates.

But demographics isn't everything. There are plenty of places where you've got one church where everything seems to be going great, and another church, a few blocks away, that's slowly dwindling away. There are no great disasters happening; it's just that one by one the gifted people move on, and others stay but due to a new job or the birth of a child or age or injury or whatever, find themselves unable to do what they used to do around the church, and there just doesn't seem to be the people around to take their places. Slowly but surely the church declines, and no amount of affirming that God is the life-giving creator and the faithful restorer seems to turn the tide. They can preach revival and renewal until they're blue in the face, but all they get is blue in the face.

So, if it's not just demographics, what is it? Our scripture this morning offers us a possible reason. It's not the *only* possible reason, but it's a common one. Let's see what we can learn

from it. First of all, this parable recognizes that we don't all start on a level playing field. Just as people are born with different levels of intelligence, different social and educational opportunities, and different levels of love and security, churches start out with different prospects too. There are different factors to consider depending on how the church starts out. Things like, who was involved in their start and where they started. A church that started because of an ugly split from another church will have very different dynamics than a church that was intentionally planned and started by a supportive parent church.

In the parable, one servant was given five talents, another two talents, and another one. Whatever the quota we received, we need to bear in mind that the parable says we have been *entrusted* with it. Whether we received the five talents or the one, God has entrusted us with the people, the gifts and the resources in our church. To a less obvious extent we, along with the other local churches, have been entrusted with the locality we are in and therefore with the task of bearing witness to the love, peace and justice of God in that place. Now having been entrusted, we are accountable for the stewardship of our resources. Whether we are the church with the one talent or the five, we are accountable for how we utilize them in the transformation of our communities. And maybe the most important element of this parable for our consideration is, "What actually happens when we're held accountable?"

The property owner in this parable says, “Well done good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.” If we prove trustworthy in our stewardship of whatever we have been entrusted with, no matter how large or small it was, we will be entrusted with more. However, if we fail to deal wisely with what we’ve been entrusted with, the response is “Take the talent away and give it to those with the ten. For to 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.” The one with the single talent is not condemned for failing to produce as much as the one with the five. The failure is that they didn’t even make good use of their one. We are entrusted with God’s gifts, and if we prove trustworthy, we are entrusted with even more. But if we aren’t proven worthy of trust, what we have will be taken away.

Now the question that obviously needs to be addressed in light of this, is what is our talent or talents, and how are we to assess our use of them? This is not about beating ourselves up for things that may have happened in the past. It’s to help us make wise choices for the future, and that’s a crucial task for all churches these days. Whatever mistakes have been made, have been made. Whatever has been accomplished has been accomplished. Tomorrow is the next chapter in the story of the church, and tomorrow is the chapter that is still to be written. This is where we need to call upon some Holy Spirit

wisdom. This parable isn't going to help us find many answers about how to use our gifts. Yes, it tells us to invest wisely, but it doesn't tell us what to invest in. It doesn't tell us which mission strategies or worship patterns or leadership structures are the best use of our gifts.

The first thing we need to do is figure out a way to assess the needs of our area and the way those needs are or are not being met by others in our community. We need to honestly and prayerfully assess our own gifts, and then begin to assess the points of contact between what we have to offer and what our community needs. Didn't we do this about eight years ago when Katy was here? Yes we did. However, the needs of our community have changed since then. It's time to revisit the way we approach our community's needs and think about how we can best serve as ambassadors for Christ. Now, are you ready to hear about the biggest sabbatical project I worked on this past summer?

There are other churches in town who are also considering the needs of our community and trying to figure out how to be the best ambassadors of Christ. Gail Hill from First Baptist and I have had this ongoing conversation for a few years about how fun it would be to do ministry together. But having worked on the denominational level, we know how exceedingly difficult it is to merge two churches from two different denominations. It rarely works. Our denominational leaders frown at us whenever we bring up the subject because church mergers are an administrative nightmare.

Then someone told me about First Christian Church in Minneapolis. First Christian Church is a part of the Spring House Ministry Center and shares facilities with Lyndale United Church of Christ and Salem Lutheran Church. These are three congregations that operate independently and each of them has separate worship services in the style of their tradition, but they've combined resources and are doing some amazing ministry in Minneapolis. Pastor Gail and I think this might be a good model for ministry here in Chico too. Today after fellowship time, we've got a SWOT team who is going to meet and talk about the Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats of a project like this. Gail's team met yesterday, and hopefully in the not-too-distant future when we start planning details for our joint Christmas Eve service, we can compare notes. As our scripture lesson teaches us this morning, it's not the number of talents you have, it's what you do with them. Gail and I understand that our ministry is not about preserving institutions. Our job is to transform Chico into the image of God's kingdom. Or if you want to use the language of our scripture lesson this morning, we don't want to bury our talent in the ground where it will just sit there and do nothing. We want to be wise stewards of what we have so that we may be found trustworthy.