

September 28, 2014 -- Window #6

“Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Genesis 22:9-14; Luke 10:25-37

This window, our sixth in the series, was dedicated on April 11, 1976 at 4pm. As you can see, it was dedicated to Rev. Charles Monteith and his wife, Edna. The bulletin that accompanied the service said the following about Rev. Monteith:

Charles Monteith, a native of Vermont, was graduated from Williams College with an AB degree and from Bangor Theological Seminary with a BD degree. He has served the Congregational Church of Rockland from 1947 until his retirement in 1975, with devotion and compassion for the well-being of the church and his fellowmen. During the twenty-eight and one-half years of his pastorate, the church has grown in membership, activities and financial base, with a new church building erected and entirely paid for within 10 years.

Edna Monteith has been a constant helper and inspiration to Charles in all phases of the growth of the church. She served as Superintendent of the Church School for many years, in addition to organizing various groups and helping in their development.

I am sure many of you were there for the occasion. Our verse and last hymn were used on that day as well.

The theme of the window is a quote from Matthew 25, from the parable of the talents. A landowner leaves for several months and gives a percentage of money to several of his servants to manage while he is gone. To one he gives 5 talents, to another he gives 2 talents, and to another 1. Upon his return, the master calls his servants to his office and asks what they have done with what has been given to them. Two of the servants have doubled the money they have been given, but the other simply buried the money since he believed the risk of losing the money would be greater than investing it. He was quite wrong. Those who doubled the money were given greater responsibility over the land, while the one who did nothing, the one who did not take the risk, was punished and expelled from the house. To those who doubled the money, the master says, “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*”

Each of us are called to be good stewards of the gifts we have been given by God. Not only that - we are called to use them and even put them at risk in the world. A person can only double their money by risking the entire loss of the initial investment. The work of faith is the willful and intentional application of the gifts of God in the midst of the difficulties of the world.

As we look at this window and reflect on the pictured parables, I would like us to focus on the parts of the parables we don't normally focus on. By listening to the voices of the characters we do not normally hear from, we will develop some new insights into what it means to be a good and faithful servant of the Lord.

In our first panel, we see the moment the prodigal son returns to his father. Many of us, upon hearing the story of the prodigal son, identify with the son. We have run away from God, like the son, and, like him, come back penitent and remorseful to God. The son, who has spent his father's inheritance on 'wine, women and

wheels', decides that feeding pigs and living in a barn is not in his best interest anymore. He devises a speech to give to his father which begs forgiveness and asks to become a servant in his father's house. The father, upon seeing his youngest son return, runs out of the house and before the son can even speak, offers his son forgiveness and throws a feast for his son.

Our tradition calls us to see ourselves as the prodigal son and God as the forgiving father. But this is a parable. Parables are designed to be multi-faceted and reflective like the sides of a gemstone. What happens when you put yourself in the position of the forgiving father? What does it mean to be the one who, against all custom and tradition, runs out to greet those who have been 'out there'? What if we were in the position of the forgiving father?

In the book of Genesis is the story of two brothers, Jacob and Esau. Jacob and Esau had lived apart for many years and Jacob had to cross through Esau's land in order to get to his new home. Jacob is well aware that Esau may harbor considerable anger for having been cheated out of his inheritance and blessing by his brother, so Jacob prepares a gift for his estranged brother, and he also prepares his family for potential disaster. Jacob splits his large family into two groups and sends them in opposite directions in the event Esau attacks and kills Jacob's family. If that were to happen, a remnant would survive. Esau, in the meantime, has spent much of his life preparing to meet his brother again by amassing wealth and armies.

But when they meet, Esau with his armies and Jacob with his family and gifts, in the desert, both Jacob and Esau surprise each other by adopting the position of the forgiving father. Listen to the interaction between them:

*4 But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. 5 When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, 'Who are these with you?' Jacob said, 'The children whom God has graciously given your servant.' ...8 Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company that I met?' Jacob answered, 'To find favour with my lord.' 9 But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.' 10 Jacob said, 'No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favour. 11 **Please accept my gift** that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.'*

In the third frame, we see the 'good shepherd' finding a lost sheep. Jesus presents this parable by asking the Pharisees, '*Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?*' (Luke 15:4). Let me give you the correct answer to this question: "*No one.*" This is an example of the worst of all possible shepherds. No shepherd would ever leave 99 sheep unattended for the sake of one lost sheep. We call Jesus the Good Shepherd, in part, because of this parable, but no farmer in his right mind would hire a shepherd with this sort of attitude.

However, many of us are here today precisely because Jesus is a horrible shepherd. We are here because he sought us out and brought his lost sheep back into the fold. We identify ourselves with the lost sheep, found like the ram in the thicket in the story of Abraham and Isaac. But let's identify for a moment with the one who seeks the lost sheep. Are you willing to lose the entire flock for the sake of one lost sheep? According to Jesus, all of heaven rejoices at the return of that one. There is a certain trust here that the flock will hold together

while the shepherd goes looking for the lost. There is a certain confidence that, if the shepherd leaves to seek out the lost, he will once again return bringing another into the fold.

Many of us are taught, like Commander Spock in *The Wrath of Khan*, “*the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few*”. “*Or the one*”, Admiral Kirk adds. Indeed, Jesus is the preeminent example that the needs of the many, our salvation, outweighs the need and the survival of the one. Jesus on the Cross is most certainly the one who has died for the many for our sake. But in this parable of the Lost Sheep, everything flips upside down, and like Kirk in the next movie, *The Search for Spock*, Jesus shows us that, instead, “*the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many.*”

You are the one who outweighs the needs of the many - at least that is the way God and Jesus see it. All the disturbing things happening in the world, all the things that have happened to your friends and family, all the things you do to push yourself away from God and Christ, and yet, here you are on Sunday morning to find out what God will do for you today. This is because God chose you. This is because you were the lost sheep that the Good Shepherd went out to find. What would it look like, now that you know this about yourself, to become the seeker? To become like the Good Shepherd in the parable? Maybe it is time for you, and me, to become a seeker of lost sheep, to seek the one who outweighs the needs of the many.

Our central panel depicts the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus tells lawyer to be like the Good Samaritan and to show mercy to those who are in need. Don't be like the rabbis (walking away on the right side of the panel) who, because of the laws that govern their behavior, have decided they are duty-bound to *not* show mercy where it is so obviously needed. Don't be like the robbers (walking away on the left side of the panel), who think they can take and harm whatever they want without consequence. Be, instead, like the Good Samaritan, who stopped to help. The Samaritan heals the wounds of the broken man on the side of the road, then takes him to an inn and pays for whatever he needs. He saves the man's life.

We are told to identify with the Good Samaritan, which is interesting. Samaritans in the day and age were somewhat like the injured and robbed man in the ditch. The Jewish people believed Samaritans to be an abomination because they distorted ancient Hebrew practices. The Samaritan was worse than a foreign idolator; they tainted and altered the Hebrew faith. So the Jewish people excluded the Samaritans, kept them in a state of poverty and disallowed them entrance into their towns.

But what if, for today, we identify with the broken, robbed and injured man in this story? Think about his situation. The man is probably himself Jewish. He has watched those who are devoted to the spiritual care of the entire nation of Israel walk on by. Then a Samaritan stops and helps him. The Samaritan saves his life and then provides for the man's care at the inn. How does one repay such an act?

Well, one cannot repay it. Even if the man simply repaid the cost of the inn, it wouldn't come close to the value of what the Samaritan actually did for the man. Has anyone ever done anything for you that, upon reflection, you realize there is no way you will ever be able to repay that person? I believe one of the hardest things for us to do is to accept gifts. We feel compelled to be in debt to others, as if owing someone somehow reflects the relationship. We want to ‘*make it even*’. A true gift, a true act of mercy, however, does not fall into human economies. They cannot be measured by our standards.

In God's economy - an economy where the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many, an economy where forgiveness has a greater value than an inheritance spent wildly - *the act of receiving* itself is of value. It is a useless state of soul and mind to put ourselves in debt to Jesus for what he has done for us. It is a

waste of energy and time to assume there is some way we can repay God for all God has provided to us. We cannot pay back the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Like the man in the ditch rescued by the Samaritan, all we can do is receive the gift, receive the mercy, with gratitude and thankfulness. This is very hard to do. In this story, just for right now, put yourself in the position of the injured, robbed, dying man in the ditch by the side of the road. Who has walked by you? Who has taken things from you? Who has helped you? Who has shown you mercy? What is your reaction to that gift of help and mercy? Now, think about your spiritual life. Do you have a sense of having been rescued and saved by Christ? If not, maybe you are like the man in the ditch today, in need of mercy and salvation.

It is so hard to just receive the gift. Think of Naaman in 2 Kings 5. He is healed of leprosy by Elisha, the prophet. More than anything, Naaman wants to pay Elisha for the healing that has occurred, but Elisha wants Naaman to understand that the gifts of God cannot be repaid. Naaman is angry and upset about the situation, just like many of us are when we must acknowledge a true gift that cannot be repaid. Elisha's assistant, Gehazi, *does not* understand God's economy and takes the payment Naaman intended for Elisha for himself. Elisha curses Gehazi with the leprosy from which Naaman had been healed. The value of receiving a gift is very high in God's economy.

There are risks in each one of these parables when we identify with the forgiving father, the seeking shepherd and the injured man in the ditch. We, I believe, as a people, are risk-averse. We don't want to take the risks that faith sometimes requires of us. We don't want to take the risks that God may be asking us to take as an individual or as a church.

The risk of being like the forgiving father is that the status quo may look at us strangely. We might anger the ones who just followed the rules and expected the big payoff for doing so, like the Prodigal Son's older brother. We might even put the entire future of our estate in jeopardy, since a person who has misused money in the past is likely to do so again in the future. But the forgiving father is willing to take the risk. Are we?

The risk of seeking out the lost sheep like the Good Shepherd really does mean we might lose the flock. Jonathan Edwards, the great Congregationalist minister of the mid-1700s, lost his flock for the sake of the one. Once, Edwards brought one of the prostitutes in Northampton to church. Quickly, she testified to the presence of Christ in her life and immediately became a full member of the church. A few weeks later, the now-former prostitute was the first to the table to partake in the bread and cup of the Lord. But one of Edwards' deacons, who had grown up in the church and had served faithfully, had never had a direct encounter with the living Christ and was therefore only a half-member and, therefore, he was not able to come to the table. The deacon was not a full member of the church - but he had much power in the church. He executed that power to force Edwards out of the church at the height of Edwards' popularity. Edwards devoted the rest of his life serving the Native Americans in Massachusetts. For the sake of the one, Jonathan Edwards lost the flock. That is the risk of seeking the lost sheep.

The risk of receiving healing and mercy from others, like the Robbed Man, is that we may never be able to repay what has been given to us. The risk is that we will have to live our lives in a state of perpetual gratitude for what we have been given. We must, like Esau with his brother Jacob, simply accept the gift. Is that a risk we are willing to take, to simply accept the gift we have been given? Can we, in accepting the gift of Christ and the Holy Spirit, simply receive it and let go of all our guilt about repayment, all our sense of indebtedness, simply receive?

If we can take the risk, then perhaps we also will hear the words of the Master, when he says to us, *“Well done, forgiving and welcoming servant. Well done, seeking servant. Well done, receiving and gifted servant. Well done, good and faithful servant.”*

Amen.