

Years ago when our daughter Jessica was a small child, she loved to run on the sidewalks of the Hartford Seminary on Sherman Street in the west end of Hartford. The Seminary had just built a gleaming white and glass building designed by the renown architect, Richard Meier, standing in stark contrast to the surrounding stone, gothic buildings—the earlier home of the Seminary sold to the University of Connecticut Law School. The pronounced contrast of this white metal and glass exterior of the new building set over against the grey, gothic, 19th century stone buildings of the Law School suggests not only the bold statement of the Seminary beginning a new era in its illustrious history, but also for me suggests the effect of the power and purpose of the parables of Jesus. First readings of the parables are deceiving. These illustrations and stories so familiar they blend invisibly into the backdrop of everyday church, if examined with more nuanced reflection, begin to gleam and shine, reflecting back perspectives never-before seen, opening whole new ways of perceiving the world and ourselves never-before known. In fact a New Testament scholar of Hartford Seminary once called the parables of Jesus *condensed metaphors, tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds catching rays of something ultimate in our lives, facets of light by which we see into another world.* (Walter Wink).

Like the Seminary making a dramatic declaration about its role—not only in Hartford but throughout the world housing one of the world’s great centers of Islam—the parables Jesus unsettle us, provoking and inspiring us into new ways of thinking, new ways of perceiving God at work in our lives. Parables suggest that those willing to turn aside from the everyday perspectives and expectations --those willing to immerse and whole-heartedly invest themselves in these stories--will discover that the parables (like our faith in Jesus and our relationship to the church) will not only shape our exterior selves, but are capable of transforming our whole selves, especially our hearts as we recover the essence and the true meaning of our lives. Unlike television and the internet which titillates us, seducing us into a world of fantasy and dreamlike lost-ness, the scriptures and especially the “condensed metaphors” of parables are meant to crack the exterior shell of our lives. That hard shell that many of us have learned to present to the world can be shattered by the love of Christ, igniting our hearts, transforming us into multi-faceted, brilliant diamonds as God re-makes and reforms our whole selves.

I am reminded of a phrase in our Bibles in which that prophet Sirach praised people who “penetrate the subtleties of parables,” those who are “at home with their obscurities.” Parables are sometimes described as Zen koans—teasing the mind out of familiar channels of thought into whole new ways of interpretation and understanding. To listen to a parable--*to really listen* means that one is invited to suspend tradition--the “customary way” (normal) way of interpretation. Parables open us to the capacity to listen and receive something we do not know and could not come by any other way, the ability to evoke experiences we have never had and awareness of realities we have not even guessed at before.

Today is Ingathering Sunday the day we bring forward in thanksgiving pledges members of this church have made, returning a portion of the abundance with which God has blessed us, to God and to God’s work, and life, and ministry through this church for the sake of the world. And interestingly, today is also a day in which the gospel offers us the parable of the nature of the Kingdom of heaven—the parable of the talents, the simple, yet complex story of how we might see and live into the abundance and blessings of God in our lives. Like the examples Jesus offers in this parable—of those who apply their gifts for their sakes and the sake of the world and the one who hides, or buries his gift that it never be applied for the transformation of the world, a pledge of financial support to this church, especially in these days when there is so much unknown about the future, especially in regards to our financial well-being can be a provocative declaration. When I call making a pledge *provocative*—I mean provocative in the sense that from the rational, reasonable point of view, declaring a willingness to give away something we are not sure we are going to have six months from now, suggests that we are willing to risk something we are not sure of, which is, of course, the meaning of living by faith. To speak provocatively does not mean we intend to provoke anyone, or make them feel uneasy regarding stewardship and the church. Rather, our hope is to stimulate in the same way Jesus offers

the parables as new ways of thinking, new believing, new ways of seeing the vital relationship between the Gospel, the Good News and faith-full living and stewardship.

Keep walking, through there's no place to get to.
Don't try to see through the distances. That's not
for human beings.
Move within, but don't move the way fear makes
you move.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the
Ground. (Rumi)

Baptized, I, like all of you, am loved and cherished by God. We live with that blessing and gift beyond price every day of our lives. And every day I am learning how to live more and more into that love. And as I learn to open my heart and soul to that love, I know that the way by which I acknowledge that love is to return some part of that abundance to the source of that love. Loved by God, we cannot help but give some measure, some part of that first love in return. This is the nature of love. I love and express my love toward my family because they love me. When they shower so much affection and radiance and appreciation toward me, I cannot help but give love in return.

As I am fed and nourished by my life and work that I have found to be so rewarding, challenging, stimulating, and rich, I must give something in return. Even as I strive to give, more keeps coming my way and I am aware of the extraordinary abundance of my life. And so I consider myself a wealthy man. I have learned that being rich is living a life that cannot, at least for me, be measured in dollars or possessions.

I am reminded of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jew who turned to Christ before dying in a concentration camp during the Nazi repression. She once said: *"Oh, God, I thank you for the sense of fulfillment I sometimes have, that fulfillment is after all nothing but feeling filled with you. I promise yet to strive my whole life long for beauty and harmony and also humility and true love, whispers of which I hear inside me during my best moments.* Whispers we hear inside us during our best moments. These whispers are the breath of God, the prayers of God, the urgings of God, the filling our whole selves and souls with God. It is in these special moments that we engage in a conversation with God. God speaks and we respond. How do we respond? With what matters in our lives; simply, matter-of-factly.

There was a time when Vaclav Havel was imprisoned for his poems and plays, and through an amazing turn of events and revolution, he became the first president of Czechoslovakia and then of the Czech Republic. What Havel has to say about hope explains how parables and God functioned as a revolutionary symbol for Jesus and his followers.

A state of mind, not a state of the world... It transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons...it is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

Jesus' parables are a "glimpsed alternative" a revelation of potential that is denied constantly threatened by circumstance"...a glimpsed alternative is not a worked out program, it is always temporary, glimpsed. It is a possibility and not a reality.

Reach deep and give of your blessings and abundance and you will find the never-ending love of God. Amen

And from 2 Corinthians: *We want you to know ...about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia: for during a sever ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints....*

Creator Spirit, we thank you for life and for this world; for the possibilities of our lives and all its riches; we praise you for the arching sky and the blessed winds, for the driving clouds and the constellations on high. We praise you for the salt sea and the running water, for the everlasting hills, for the trees and the earth under our feet. We thank you for our senses by which we embrace the splendor of the morning and hear the jubilant songs of love, the smell of the breath of springtime. Grant us, we pray, a heart wide open to all this beauty and the possibility of our lives, especially the hopes and dreams our children. Accept, we pray these simple gifts and these pledges of our hope in your love and promises, and in this church and the world you have made. May they be signs of our hope and faith in the future, our covenant with you and trust in your love. Bless them and us, that in them and through them, we may be your hands and hearts in this world; that together we may support your Kingdom till that time when even the thornbush becomes aflame with the glory of God. Amen.