November 16, 2014 In-gathering Sunday

All Saints’ Church Year A/Proper 28

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Psalm 90:1-8, 12 Matthew 25:14-30

Let us pray: Before the mountains were brought forth, or the land and the earth were born;

from age to age you are God, and you have been our Refuge. Amen

This morning, I want to tell you a story about a man, the Rev. Gideon Khabela, who taught me that the hero in our gospel story is the one who buried the talent. An interpretation, my guess, that you have not heard before.

While in Seminary, I met Gideon, his wife Nomsa, and their three children, Mazwe, Nondumiso, and Nkonzo. They were from South Africa, Zulu, Christian, Presbyterian, and deeply tribal. Gideon was a fierce intellectual, rooted in the gifts of a Western education and the power of his ancestral legacy. We all became very close.

In the late 80’s, after Gideon had earned his doctorate, he decided to return to his native land, rather than secure one of the many professorships offered to him throughout the country. His friends, (I was one of them), protested with outcries.

He silenced us: “If I don’t return and have a voice in what and who we will become as a nation, I will lose my identity and my soul.” No arguing against *that* clarity.

Return he did, and over the next decade, he became a part of Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s team of confidants and was named as the Chaplain to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

As you can imagine, Gideon was a man of many gifts, much courage, and many talents.

One day, Gideon and I had a conversation about the word, Talents, as found in the gospel of Matthew this morning. The scholars have many different ideas of what talent means- they usually refer to it as representing a lot of money- wages from 1 year of labor, to many years, to even 15 years. Imagine if 15, then the man who was given 5 talents, was given 75 years’ worth of wages. Not possible, but then maybe that’s the point. Maybe we are not supposed to place on talents, a money value. Talents do not equal dollars. We do not know what the weight was that a talent measured.

Gideon gave me one of my first lessons in linguistics. “Talents are not money,” he said, “but rather the word is a place holder- it represents the CAPACITY to hold and measure wealth, whether it comes in gold, silver or precious jewels. So rather than see talents as a slew of coins, it’s more accurate to see Talents as power, like a scale that can hold much weight or muscles that can move mountains.”

He continued, “And what is the gold one can hold, can carry, can sustain,” he asked, with a gentle voice? “It has nothing to do with currency.”

I had no answer that didn’t sound trite.

“For me it’s not gold, but my capacity to endure suffering. I pray for this jewel. Those two men, one with two talents, and the other with five, who expanded on their capacity to hold gold, could only do that by cooperating with the government. I pray every day not to be co-opted by Apartheid.

“This is what I value: the ability to rely on God as my strength and my refuge. This is what is meant by talents for me: my capacity to hold suffering, and the more talents I am given, the more I suffer and the more I suffer, the more I realize that I am made holy in my desire to live by God’s will, no matter the plan. Talents measure the capacity to surrender fully to God, a frightening and liberating invitation. In that way I defend against the temptation to give in.

In 2003, Gideon and Nomsa invited my family to come to South Africa, to share in their work as they ministered to twenty-seven “outstations” (churches) in villages throughout KwaZulu Natal. I took a sabbatical and we went for six weeks. My daughters were 14 and 10.

Every morning, we rode either by jeep, truck, van or horses into different villages, sometimes hours away from any kind of “convenience store.” We brought food, water, detergent soap, prayers and song and we were greeted with kindness, gratitude and joy. Some of the villagers had never seen white folks. The children loved my girls and taught them many games, even though they didn’t share a language. I saw every kind of church “building” imaginable, much poverty, and the love of Christ experienced.

We were blessed to be there during the Ingathering of the 27 outstations. Everyone was travelling to the mother church, their Cathedral, on a hill, in Pholela, a geographic center point, four walls of cement blocks, a dirt floor, folding chairs, a corrugated tin roof, fresh water, and a kitchen.

“How is everyone getting here?”

“They are walking, most of them for the whole day. Our celebration will start around 8:00 pm and we will eat and dance and sing and preach all night long.”

We arrived early and we began to cook large pots of stew and we waited for the first kerosene lamp that would crest into sight. The stars lit up the night sky, there was a warm wind, and Lizzy pointed to the first light. And soon, like spokes on a wheel, lines were appearing from all angles. We could turn 360 degrees and see the march of mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, grandparents and children, cutting through the valley on worn foot paths, to reach the pinnacle- their destination. Soon we heard the drums and the singing, and it finally dawned on me. This was their procession. They were coming into church. We were waiting for them, and we were at the epicenter of the universe, God’s place.

We ate- food appeared from every path. Then there were vestry meetings, and council meetings, and then the church service began, around midnight. Around 1:00 in the morning, Gideon preached and he preached on this morning’s gospel passage from Matthew.

“Oh you good and faithful servants, you have suffered much. You knew the Evil Master only too well, who was harsh, reaping where he did not sow, gathering where he did not scatter seed. And you defended yourself. You buried your talent, thank goodness, and you survived. You held on, you persevered, you protected yourself and your families, and you believed. And you are alive. You resisted. The evil master has been destroyed, and you have overcome days of distress and anguish, days of ruin and devastation, days of darkness and gloom.

“No longer do you need to share your faith and love only as an armor, or wear your hope only as a helmet. You are free. You can unearth your talent and live. When the Master told you that you were black and therefore not human, you rejected him. You have dignity, a voice; you can stand tall. We are God’s children, loved and precious in God’s sight.”

At this point, the ululation began… a high pitched trill of the tongue that sends chills down my spine. And then the dancing, the tamborines, the drums all began as a response to Gideon’s words. He kept preaching. I turned to Nomsa and told her that she did not need to translate anymore. I wanted to be carried away by the passion, the energy, and the faith, and carried I was, deep into the night.

Today is our day, our ingathering and this is a very important day. We are bringing in from all walks of life our pledges, our promises, and our hopes that Christ’s love is experienced and shared in this place, we call church, God’s place. We are placing them in the alms basins and raising them up at the altar in honor and thanksgiving of all that God has given to us and we return. Our children are joining us as they share their promises as well.

We have abundance, a full capacity to bear the weight of riches. We worship in one of the most beautiful churches in the country, if not the world. We are safe, we are healthy, and we are poised to do God’s work. Our ingathering, blessed today, will give us the capacity to build the faith. We can bear the weight of our riches, and also the weight of those who suffer, within this community, and without.

God writes his words on our hearts; God’s activity runs through the universe. And we are made holy by our desire to live within God’s will.

Amen.

(the Rev.) Jamie L. Hamilton