



**The Bishop's Charge
to the 149th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara
by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

Saturday, November 4, 2023

I speak to you in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now I'll bet that at least some of you are wondering about the Gospel this morning – why did the bishop choose that one? Good question. The tricky bit at the end probably needs explaining. We'll get there. But I have to say that this parable really chose me – I didn't really choose it. A little while ago in conversation with our eldest son, who was kindly inquiring what the theme was this year for Synod, I mentioned that I needed to think about a Gospel passage that spoke about stewarding God's gifts. And he replied, what about the parable of the talents? And then he said it was his favourite one. I asked him why – and he said, "because it's Jesus showing us how to live isn't it?"

Well, when your 25-year-old son says something like that, you kind of sit up and take notice, don't you? He's a man of few words, being a deep thinker, so I went away to think, pray, and study about that comment. And you know what, it turns out that he's right.

Now I have to say, parables are such strange things aren't they? They're never straightforward. Jesus uses them in the Gospels to disrupt our thought patterns and to try and almost shock us into thinking in kingdom ways – not the ways of the world. But this parable, well, this one has scholars confused. It's often called a wisdom parable rather than a kingdom parable because it doesn't sit easily with the rest. And I get that: it doesn't begin "the kingdom of God is like, . . ." But come with me for a bit and I think we can understand this parable in a way that helps us live.

Okay, so Jesus offers us a rich image today --- literally. We hear about the example of the master taking off and leaving three servants in charge, we hear that he leaves them with more wealth to tend to than you and I can probably imagine. The talents spoken of here in fact, piles of gold coins. Bushel baskets full, in fact. To my understanding, one talent of gold coins weighed between fifty and seventy-five pounds. So even the 'least' of the servants received enough that he may have been challenged to carry it all on his own.

As Jesus tells the story now, we hear that these piles of gold were left with each one of them to tend and manage and grow. And of course, we know – as must Jesus’ audience have known, that there is no growing without risk.

There is simply no growing without risk.

And yet, I completely get the third servant in our parable today. Perhaps you do, too. I mean, many of us have seen what can happen when resources are invested in ways that are too risky. At least by burying the money, he didn't lose it, right? At the same time, we can't help but recognize that his existence is small and timid and not what God would intend for us at all. That is not what God intends for us.

Jesus tells this story to his disciples in order to prepare them for the days ahead when their faith will be tested. This parable shows how the disciples are to demonstrate their faithfulness as they anticipate the return of the Lord.

What does faithfulness look like while they wait? In Matthew’s Gospel faithfulness is becoming more and more like Jesus – in doing the ministry of Jesus. Jesus came to announce the arrival of God’s kingdom by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least.

And all who would follow him are to do the same: to preach the good news of the kingdom to the whole world by going about the work that the master has called them to do: visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and feeding the hungry. And those who are found faithful – those who have made more out of what they have been given - will hear their Master say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

I think we can see ourselves in this parable. Like these three servants, God has richly blessed us in a thousand ways. In reality, our bushel baskets are so full we can't lift them on our own. We live in the first world – and even if we think we’re strapped, compared to the rest of the world, we are unimaginably rich. God has given us all of it and asks only that we use it, spend it, invest it, and grow it. God has given it all to us and asks only that we love and trust God enough not to sit on it, hide it, or bury it.

One last thing. At first glance, it seems awfully harsh to me that the third servant was punished so severely. However, don’t you think that even before his sentence was pronounced that he was already there? Already in that dark place --- put there not by the master, not by God, but by his own fear and poverty of vision? What do you think?

Okay, so let’s talk about the first two guys. Because I want to put the emphasis on hope and hard work, on trust and expectation, on care and responsibility. I think we can speak with some certainty about all of these things because they have been our lived and grounded experience this year.

We have spent the past year stewarding God's gifts for mission. And we have indeed been stewarding, . . .

I think the meaning of the word stewardship is perhaps a little different than the one we usually work with; and that's worth noting. If we take our parable for instance, it is clearly the expectation of the man – from whom those resources have been given – that the servants act in place of, be proxy for, serve, and do business for him.

Let's also sit with the word talent that's used in the parable. The man gives all the servants talents. Of course, in the ancient Near East this word simply meant money. But in our context, and in our language it means something different: it means capability, capacity, and know-how.

So how have we, using our capability, capacity and know-how, served God and God's interests – namely the Gospel this year?

So, given those are God's interests – and, if we imagine ourselves like the servants in this parable – because it's always good to see ourselves in scripture: how have we used what we've been given in all those areas to increase the amount of love in our parishes, and in our diocese, and in our world? Are we living into the bold vision of the multiplication of all that we've been given?

Well, we continue to respond to the world around us, as leaders in refugee sponsorship. Did you know that we have collectively helped almost 500 people – mothers, fathers, children, grandparents – be resettled to our communities in the last decade?

In the midst of new wars, in Ukraine and now the Holy Land, we are generously responding to appeals for donations to support relief efforts through The Primate's World Relief & Development Fund and its partners. And we are fervently and unceasingly praying for peace and end to the brutality of these wars.

We're also galvanizing to address the climate breakdown, Climate Justice Niagara, in addition to its zero-emission church commitments, is engaging with one of the Lambeth Calls to join the Communion Forest movement. This is a tangible way for us to live our baptismal covenant and care for God's creation.

Leaning into our commitment to truth and reconciliation, and responding to the housing crisis, we've partnered with St. Matthew's House to provide deeply affordable housing for Indigenous and Black seniors. The 412 Barton project is both innovative, compassionate, and just.

Our progress in anti-racism training continues – we are excited that this important training is now in its pilot phase, training the trainers so to speak.

This initiative will help us change the way we see our siblings in Christ and be a more inclusive Church.

Speaking of loving our neighbour, the ministry among migrant farmworkers on the peninsula is thriving. Thanks to our missionaries: Cela and Antonio Illas and to all those at St. Alban's and St. John's, Jordan for all their support of those who help put the food on our tables while they toil in difficult circumstances, far from home and community. We are also engaging with other Christian partners to widen the sphere of support we provide to these hidden workers, including our insurer Ecclesiastical which has invested in this ministry to the tune of \$50,000.

Mission in Acts in Oakville – let me tell you about this ministry. We know that mainland, secular Mandarin speakers come from a culture of religious oppression in China. But many are told to look for a cross on a building when they arrive in Canada – because Christians will help. And so Garfield Wu and the many servants whom God has raised up for this ministry of welcome and integration hold open their arms and greet those whom Christ has brought to our doors.

The All Saints Mission: Canon Mike Deed is the priest-missioner at All Saints, . . . we opened a new church this year folks! The first one for over 20 years, and I hope and pray it will not be another twenty years before the next. This mission is learning to love and to connect with its neighbourhood in new ways.

And we have a couple of people – Susie Kim and Rob Miller - whose unique skills have marked them out to begin new Christian communities – a very difficult task – but they're doing good work on our behalf.

This is what we've made of some of the talents we've been given. There's lots more – lots more but I'll stop there. You get the picture. No burying the talents around here. We're taking the risk of faith together.

Now some may think that if we could just do what we have been doing only better, working harder, adding more and more programmes that we'll beat this decline we've been experiencing as a Church - across the whole of the Western Hemisphere. Now I have to tell you that this is another version of burying our talent.

You and I know that we can't keep doing that. You and I know that. We can't keep doing more like things haven't changed. That's not where we're being called in this new age.

We have to do differently. As parishes, as a diocese, and as a Church.

The path to life abundant does not lie in manyness and muchness. It lies in depth. In the depth of our faith; in the depth of our relationships with each other; and in the depth of our relationships with the world. And of course, they're all connected.

The more we learn of God's love for us, the more that changes our hearts and helps us to love each other; the more we learn about loving each other helps us to love those outside our walls. And the more we love those outside our walls the more we change our world. And our world needs changing – by God it needs changing, for the better.

And it all starts in getting to know Jesus better – this is the foundation: We're building the habit of faith through Revive, Alpha, Cursillo, Christian Foundations, Bible Study, and more Bible study – I can't tell you how many times I have been engaged in conversations with folks about the transformative power of studying the scriptures together; how the ability to ask questions and search for meaning together deepens faith and changes community. Working on deepening our faith is foundational to our sustainability and growth as a Church. Because you gotta know Jesus in order to become like him and do his ministry. And we're not trying to be anything else but the gathered community of Jesus followers. It's in this way – spending time with fellow Christians talking about what really matters – getting to know Jesus better – that we take five talents and make 10.

So, carry on. And if you're to do more of anything, do more of this. Ask for more of this in your parish communities. Lead more of this yourselves. This is an investment of the greatest value.

With that foundation, we build on it.

And we're doing just that being faithful, through breakfast programs, mental health initiatives, clothing stores, community hubs, and more... we're building a mixed ecology model for our Church – you'll hear that term increasingly – where we build faith and then work to change the world with God's love; a Church that equips the saints for mission in the world. We are becoming a mixed ecology church – all that means is that we are working at both/and – traditional-attractional and missional forms of church. That's healthy, diversified, faithful ministry and it's the model that although it might have felt risky in the beginning is starting to become our new normal. And that's exciting.

It's simple but it's also so powerful. And you're doing it.

We can all do it. In ways that fit us. It takes just two or three people of peace to share the love of God in works of love and words of mercy. Two or three. Seriously. Two or three.

Ordinary parishes are recovering and leaning into the future with sure and certain hope and a cautious optimism. I have been so humbled by what is happening and by the trust that leaders are choosing to embrace in these times, places like St. James Fergus, St. Paul's Dunnville, St. John's Elora, our beautiful Cathedral, St. George's Georgetown, St. Paul's Caledonia, Christ Church Woodburn, The Church of Our Saviour, The Redeemer. This is just a cross-section – there are so many others who are also facing forward with the godly expectation that if they use what God has given them for good and for love, that love will be multiplied.

And for that reason, I have faith in the future that we'll have faith in the future. You know, a lot of nonsense gets talked about the church being done. Don't you believe it Niagara, don't you believe it one bit.

Yes, we are changing; we are learning what it is to be a Church that puts God's mission at the centre of all that we do; again and again we are being called to life and compelled to love in new ways that are surprising us – delighting us – fulfilling us; we are learning how to engage with our culture again; we are learning how to be the face and hands of Christ in community again. Just the other day, I was sent pictures of the Kenyan asylum seekers finding food and warmth at All Saints as the churches in Hamilton collaborate overnight to urgently feed and clothe a vulnerable group of people.

The MAP process has helped us with all of us, revitalizing and surfacing our vision, while helping us to better understand why we're here as a Church and what we're supposed to be doing about that both now and in the near future.

When you look at the diocesan MAP and what we've accomplished through God's grace, its astonishing. Over the coming year, we'll be working on refreshing our MAP through a process that will help us discern in a way that is even bigger and bolder by the leading of the Spirit. We're on the move again. And if you've done the MAP and you're ready to take a little godlier risk to increase your vision for the present and future, a MAP 2.0 process is available for your parish too.

See, what I know for sure is that as Proverbs 29:18 says, "without a vision, the people perish" but the opposite is true too: "with a vision the people flourish!"

With a vision, we're confident in the fact that we have a future! And that's why we're doing the campaign feasibility study.

Now look. We're living in hard times. It's a risk. But it's a faithful one. And we know that there's never a perfect time for a campaign; we know the Church has prospered through hard times many times before. That's because we draw from the well of resilience constantly replenished by the Holy Spirit. We know how to do love, we know how to do hope. We know how to live into hard work for the other.

And we are people of expectation: we expect that God will provide. God has been so generous to us – trusting us with so much - and has only asked that we multiply that generosity.

We are living into those things as we discern whether we should engage in a campaign to resource our mission action plans in our parishes and in the diocese – to multiply the talents we have up and down our diocese. The majority of the money we'll raise, if we choose to proceed, is for our parishes. 65% of what you raise stays in your parish to resource your Spirit-inspired vision. And the remaining 35% will also be used to support our common ministries - leadership for the parishes, healing and reconciliation, and other diocesan ministries that you've told us you care about.

Through a campaign, we have an opportunity to steward the resources God has entrusted to our care more faithfully, more richly, and more boldly for the building up of God's Church in Niagara. In our discernment about this, I'm hoping we'll let our hearts dwell in faithfulness, in hope, and in expectation. There really isn't anything to lose by proceeding. And I hope you'll support this the campaign because you believe in God, in your Church, in your parish and in the vision that has been surfaced by your MAP. Folks, this is a road out of the ravages of Covid. I hope we can take it together with faith in the future.

While we're speaking about resources and stewarding, we've been hard at work with the budget. We've made some significant investments in ministry: stewarding soundly, realistically, and wisely, pulling in our belts because the 2024 budget year is challenging. But things are improving as parish finances gradually recover. You'll notice that after the 200k reduction in the personnel line from last year's budget, we've managed to keep expenditures level this year – and, in a year in which we've seen costs significantly rise this represents a substantial reduction in our expenditures.

I must just send an arrow prayer of thanks to our forebears who invested theirs wisely so that good ministry and mission could be underwritten today. It is truly a blessing to reap the rewards of faithful stewardship as you'll see in the budget presentation.

Now while I'm on the subject of thanks, I'd like to recognize two people whom I, in concert with our dean, Tim Dobbin, am appointing as new canons of Christ's Church Cathedral:

The Reverend Pamela Guyatt: Pam is a faithful, caring, and devoted parish priest who has served our diocese for 20 years. Her infectious sense of humour, love for those she serves, and practical theology radiate the light of Christ through her vocation. Pam has served in Ancaster and Merritton, in addition to her present role as rector of St. John's in Jordan. Pam is always willing to support our common life, be it as the Regional Dean for Lincoln, as our honorary clerical secretary of synod, or as a member of the Financial Advisory Committee.

The Reverend Nirmal Mendis: is a dedicated, humble, and much-loved pastor who has served in ordained ministry for some 40 years. He cares deeply for all his parishioners and channels the love and compassion of Christ in all aspects of his priestly vocation. Nirmal's service to the Church has spanned the globe, starting in Sri Lanka and continuing in Ontario, where he has served in both the dioceses of Toronto and Moosonee before coming to Niagara in 2013. Nirmal has a particular charism for ministry in rural communities, equipping the saints to bear witness to the Gospel.

So, let's congratulate these new canons of our cathedral. We honour your ministry among us and we give thanks to God for your commitment to our beloved Church.

I'd also like to acknowledge Canon Donna Bomberry who is the recent recipient of the Anglican Award of Merit. The Primate visited St. Alban's Beamsville in September to honour Donna with this award for distinguished service. We're proud of her long, faithful, and creative contributions to improving relations and fostering reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the Anglican Church of Canada, as well as within the Anglican Communion.

Two other people are being acknowledged for extraordinary service to the Anglican Communion by the Archbishop of Canterbury – this time a few years ago but because of Covid, we were unable to have an appropriate celebration.

Dr John Bowen – The Alphege Award for Evangelism and Witness. For his attractive articulation of the love of God for all people, with a particular heart for those who have not yet heard the name of Jesus, and for his mentoring and discipling of Christian leaders.

And Archbishop Colin Johnson – The Cross of St Augustine for Services to the Anglican Communion. For extraordinary efforts and leadership in sustaining communion through initiating ongoing dialogue amongst Bishops across the Anglican Communion – especially Canada, Africa, the UK and the USA – following Lambeth 2008 through to 2020.

They'll be celebrated at a Choral Evensong on December 10th at St. Peter's, Cobourg. Many congratulations to them both.

And now it is my time to offer some thanks for the hard work of the last year. I want to thank our regional deans and archdeacons who form such a strong ring of support and contact for our diocesan structures. I want to thank members of our diocesan committees whose talents are invested at a tremendous return for our ministries. Thank you for serving. I want to thank members of Synod Council for their gift of time and care every month in working together for the good of our diocese. You all remind me of what a privilege it is to serve Christ and his Church every day.

On our synod office team, I want to thank Emily Hill and Ian Mobsby for inhabiting entirely new roles with such intentionality. In the newly imagined structures for the diocese, we are very well served by their experience, imagination, and intelligence. Thanks to Kemi – she is quite a special person who works tirelessly to support all our ministry – she’s the real deal and her powers of analysis and interpretation have led to many a breakthrough in our thinking and the stewardship of our resources for God’s mission.

My thanks, as ever to our dean: Tim Dobbin. For being a partner in ministry, in prayer, and in the leadership of the diocese. Again, in the newly imagined structure for Niagara which we are living into, our dean plays a major role in with our senior leadership team, and I am grateful for his wisdom and experience. My abiding thanks to Archbishop Johnson who is a wonderful and supportive assistant bishop for us. And my thanks to our tremendously capable and compassionate chancellor – Canon Greg Tweney. You need to know, members of Synod, that we are the envy of the Canadian Church for many of our staff members and most especially for the wise counsel of our chancellor. Thank you, Greg, for your commitment and for all that you do.

And now, my thanks to two people whose price is above rubies: Archdeacon Bill Mous and Jane Wyse. Those of you who have had the pleasure of interacting with them know of their deep competence and kindness. “Busy” is such a bland word and it doesn’t begin to adequately describe the complexity that these two people preside over in the episcopal office. So let me say this: Jane, bless you for your patience and for your omnicompetence. You are the most tremendous gift. And Bill, thank you for your ever-expanding range of gifts – my appreciation for them and for you is profound. Thank you for sharing them with us - and at every level of the Church. We are deeply blessed by your whole-hearted commitment to the Church of God. These two are also a great deal of fun to work with.

Members of Synod, I want you to know that the folks who work at the Synod office do not merely do jobs. Their commitment to their vocations as the servants of Synod: those who enact your hopes and dreams for all the talents we have in this diocese, is broad and deep. It is more lifestyle than job. So, my deep thanks to them on behalf of us all.

Friends, God has trusted us with much, and God calls us to engage in the risk of faith; to become more and more like Christ and to live into the health and diversity of the mixed ecology – mission and tradition - the new and ancient church. And God is calling us to a bigger vision than we could ever imagine on our own. Remember that without risk there is no growth. With a vision, the people flourish.

And now, I leave all these matters of mission and ministry that I have described to you – to your godly and prayerful consideration.

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.