

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost, November 13, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

### **Use them or lose them**

When I started my work in a Church in Kansas City, Missouri over twenty years ago, it was a nice pastoral sized congregation with 150 people in Church on Sundays, some nice buildings, lots of extra space for parking, lawns, trees and play areas. It had a twelve person Vestry that did very little except approve what the Rector said they needed to do. The treasurer had a very easy job even though their budget was about \$120,000 (20+ years ago). There were very few line items on the Treasurer's report, the largest item was labeled "Miscellaneous" and \$75,000 of the 120,000 was in that line item.

When they called me to be their Rector they knew they needed a leader to reorganize them and put them to work in ministry. The first year I was there we held a Vestry Retreat and we set up a Vestry Committee system. Each Vestry member was to recruit a group of parishioners to serve with him or her on a specific committee.

We had Worship, Education, Service/Outreach, Evangelism, Buildings & Grounds, Finance, and Pastoral Care. The first task of each committee was to pray for guidance that God would lead each committee to define itself and end up with a purpose—a reason for being—and then get busy doing that ministry.

That process worked fairly well, except for the man who chaired the Service/Outreach Committee. They had a small budget to work with but all they could come up with was giving the money away to different community organizations. I couldn't tell them what they ought to be doing that was their calling, their ministry, their community. And I did not want to undermine their integrity as a newly formed ministry of outreach committee.

The chair of that committee was a man who was the head photographer for the Hallmark Corp. which had its headquarters in Kansas City. A whole year went by and that committee still did not have a purpose. John and his people prayed and talked and pondered and nothing came to them. They couldn't discern what God might be calling to do or be.

Somewhere in their second year as a committee, John, the chairman, called me up and said it just hit him, what God wanted the committee and the whole congregation to do. Although he was a professional photographer, he grew up on a farm in Nebraska and he knew about farming. Our church had lots of unused land, fertile land and the piece of property he had in mind had been part of a home farm years ago and had 12 inches of top soil. John wanted us to till up a space 80 x 80 feet and plant a vegetable garden and all the produce could be taken to the cathedral where we had a soup kitchen.

Everyone who heard John's idea lit up and agreed that this was how God wanted us to use our labors and our resources—our talents—to feed the hungry. The veggie garden began...tomatoes, peppers, squash, potatoes, corn, green beans. Actually the first year the corn didn't do so well. Someone came by in the middle of the night and stole 1,000 ears of ready to

harvest corn and then we learned that the hungry homeless didn't have enough teeth to eat and enjoy corn on the cob and so the corn was replaced the next year with other vegetables.

My point is, when people prayed about their gifts and talents, they learned what they were and how to use them and they risked their money, time and ideas. That vegetable garden is still producing after twenty years and literally thousands of bushels of fresh vegetables have been given to those in need, those who are hungry.

In our parable which is today's Gospel (Matthew 25:14-30), Jesus says that if we have the courage to use the skills God has given to us, those skills will multiply and our accomplishments will be beyond belief. He may be also warning us that by not using our God given talents we will lose them and so the message is: Do not be afraid. Have faith, take a chance, and accept God's challenge. *Remember that God is not going to call us to do anything he has not prepared us for.* By accepting his challenge, our lives will never be the same.

Michelangelo, back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century once said, "The great danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high but that it is too low and we reach it."

Most importantly this morning, remember that whatever we are to make it an offering to God and when that is our purpose—whatever our work—the Parable of the Talents is coming true. It is in this way that we will truly enter into the joy of our master.

Do you know your gifts for ministry?

Amen.