

# *The Sunnybrook Pulpit*

*Rev. Ross Smillie*

September 22, 2019

## **The Call to Witness**

*A rich man called his servants together. He was going on a long trip and so he delegated responsibility over his assets while he was gone. To one servant he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money. – Matthew 25:14-30*

A number of years ago, I was attending Summer School at the Vancouver School of Theology on the UBC campus. One evening I grew tired of reading in my room, and went to one of my favorite spots, behind the Museum of Anthropology (slide), where there is a spectacular view of Burrard Inlet and the North Shore and the setting sun is reflected in the windows of the museum. The museum is set at the top of high cliffs. (slide) There is a fence there, a barrier keeping people away from the cliffs, with a sign warning of the danger, but it is a low fence and easy to climb.



While I was sitting trying to read, but distracted by the beauty of the place, I noticed a group of four or five noticeably inebriated students climb the fence and go through the trees towards the cliff's edge. A short time later, I heard screaming. I went to investigate and found several people, stumbling drunk, on a small patch of grass at the top of the cliff. Their friend had fallen over the edge, they said, and another had climbed down to help him. At first, I thought they might be crying wolf, but I sent someone for help and spent the next little while trying to keep the others away from the edge, and away from me. I didn't want them knocking me over.

Eventually I lay down on my stomach so I could look over the edge without having to worry about someone stumbling into me from behind. There I saw their friend. The slope was steep, and he must have tumbled down it, head over heels until he came to rest at least fifty yards below. After a few minutes, someone joined him.

The least inebriated of the group had climbed down after him, wearing only flip flops, and eventually had found a way to get to him. I watched him for a moment, and before I realized what he was doing, he was lifting his unconscious friend onto his back so that he could carry him out. Up until that point, I was so preoccupied with fending off the drunk friends at the top of the cliff that I had forgotten about the one who had climbed down, and even when I saw him, I hadn't tried to communicate with him, but now I realized that there was vital information he needed to have. He needed to know that he was not alone, that help was on the way, and that the best way he could help his friend was to put him down and wait. I convinced him to lay his friend back down on the ground and check his vitals. He was breathing and bleeding, I was told. I talked him through some basic first aid.

After what seemed like an eternity, the rescue crew showed up. The fire department had obviously done this before; they came with rappelling equipment, went over the edge right down to him, put him on a stretcher, and lowered him to a hovercraft ambulance that had come in across the water to the beach below. I was interviewed by the police and my part in this small drama was done. Over the next few days I watched the papers and listened to the radio, but there was no mention of the incident. I never even found out even whether he had lived.

But I remember that incident vividly, in part because it made me aware of a failing on my part that may well have made the difference between life and death. I failed to communicate something that vitally needed to be communicated. That young man who had climbed down needed to know that he was not alone, that help was on the way, and I neglected to tell him. That information was precious, and I kept the precious treasure of that information to myself and neglected to share it. If the man lived it was despite my failure. If he died or spent his life in a wheelchair, my failure might have contributed to that.

The parable we just heard is about treasure and how we sometimes keep it to ourselves. It is the story of a hugely wealthy person who goes away for an extended business trip. Now you don't get to be as loaded as this guy is without doing a little wheeling and dealing. The story says of him that he is a hard man, who reaps where he has not sown and who gathers where he has not scattered. He's looking for a profit from everywhere! He sounds like the ancient equivalent of Donald Trump. So picture this guy as the Donald and picture these three servants as three Apprentices, waiting to see who gets fired when the Donald gets back from his business trip.

Well, two of these apprentices take these treasures and invest them, and by the

time the Donald gets back they've doubled his money. So he gives them a raise and puts them in charge of a company. But the third manager simply digs a hole in the ground and hides the treasure. That was considered the safest way of dealing with a trust in those days. It was the ancient equivalent of investing in GICs. If times are good, you've still got your original investment. If times are rough and everyone else is losing their shirt, you're going to look pretty good when you dig it up and you haven't lost anything. Well, unfortunately that just wasn't good enough for the Donald and this poor slob hears those dreaded words, "You're Fired!"

I've always found this parable a little confusing. Sometimes people suggest that the rich man represents God, which would make God a bit like Donald Trump! Now I am sure that is the way that Trump thinks, but that is not the way the Bible speaks of God and it is not the way a parable works. This master is described as an unscrupulous, uncharitable old sod, about as unlike God as you could get, except for this one thing: that God doesn't want us to just sit on our treasure either. This story is about the conflict between an attitude of fear and an attitude of confidence. It is about those who are so afraid of being wrong that they are afraid to do anything right. And so they bury their treasure, where it cannot be lost, or used. They deprive the world around them, they deprive even God, of the benefits of using that treasure toward an enriching end.

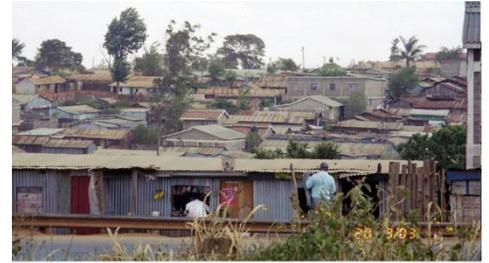
As a church too, I think we have a treasure. That treasure is the good news that we are not alone and that help is on the way. We are not alone because at the heart of reality there is a God of love, a God whose love overflows, who is on our side. Help is on the way because God's Spirit is actively at work in the world, drawing all people and all creation into a community of love, God's kingdom. That is the good news that we share week by week, that we are not alone, that help is on the way. That faith story nourishes a healthy and a responsible way of life; it calls people to care and to love and to suffer; it is the basis for just and peaceful societies. Our faith story is a story of people through the ages who have pursued truth and justice and peace. Our faith story is a treasure which cries out to be shared.

But how to share it? We've all experienced lots of examples of people who share their faith in arrogant, condescending, oppressive ways. The display over in the corner there includes two apologies that the United Church has made for the arrogance and oppression of our relations with the First Peoples of this land. Sometimes Christians have been so zealous to share their own faith that they have been blind to the treasures that other people and other cultures have. Sometimes the Christian gospel has been placed at the service of political or cultural

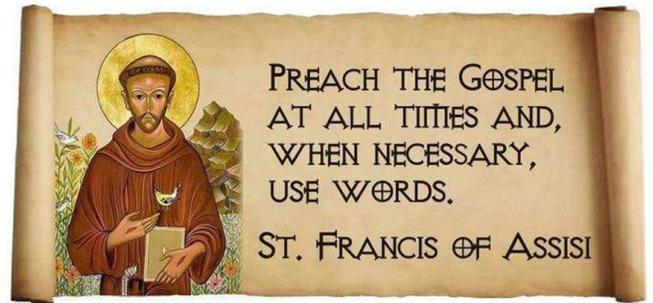
imperialism. Sometimes the Christian gospel has been co-opted by those who are opposed to modern ideas and modern science, forgetting that our brains were given us by God and God expects us to use them. And out of fear that we will fall into those errors or get confused with such people United Church people have often been reluctant to bear witness to the good news; we have buried our treasure rather than investing it.

When I visited Kenya a few years ago, I visited a ministry with street children that had been started by a little church. (slide) The people of this church were concerned about all the children who weren't being looked after in one of the slums that surround Nairobi. Many of these children were orphaned, many of them were abandoned, but they were all on the streets all day, because it cost money to go to school: money for uniforms, for pencils and notebooks, and for school fees. To most people, the street children were a nuisance and a threat. They stole food, they fought, they caused trouble.

So this little church started DayLove, a centre for street children. They started by offering them a meal, one meal a day. They got some help and opened a dormitory, where the homeless kids could sleep safely. They got some more help and started a school. When I visited, all of the children started in kindergarten, no matter what age they were, because before they could learn anything else, they needed to learn how to sit still and pay attention for more than a minute or two at a time. After they had developed that ability they were integrated into regular classes. The older ones received vocational training in woodworking and sewing. But what struck me most profoundly was how clear the volunteers from this little church were about why they were doing what they were doing. "Every child is a child of God," they said, "and precious in his sight." I don't think I have ever heard it expressed so clearly and so straightforwardly. Where everyone else saw these children as a problem, a threat and a burden, the people of this church had the faith to see them as children of God and therefore infinitely precious.



St. Francis once exhorted his followers to “preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.” (slide) United Church people tend to be pretty good about being good news through actions, but there are times when we need to use words. Without actions, words have no power or integrity. But without words our actions are ambiguous. Words are important. There can



be no faithful witness to the God of love without a willingness to speak. And there are three keys to speaking about the God of love. The first is that it has to be in dialogue rather than monologue. We have to be willing to listen and learn as much as to speak and share. The second is that it has to be an act of genuine love and care, not a means of filling the pews or building our own esteem. The third is that it is an act of witness. Let me say a bit more about that last point.



Christians often use the words “testimony and witness” in describing how we share our faith stories. (slide) These are words that we usually associate with the courtroom. A witness in a courtroom is someone who has witnessed something, and who is prepared to bear witness by speaking about what he or she has witnessed. What the witness says is his or her testimony. It must be something that the witness

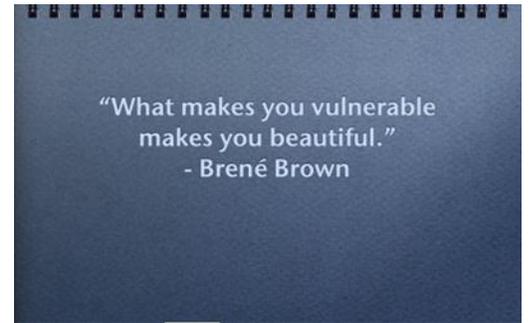
has personally seen or heard or experienced, and it has to be in the witness’s own words, or it quickly becomes clear that it is false testimony.

In the same way, we are called to bear witness to nothing more nor less than what we have witnessed. That is the key. We have to start with our own experience, with what we have witnessed. Maybe you really don’t know what to make of God, but you do know that when you were sick, someone made you a pot of chicken soup; or maybe you know that there is something that happens here on a Sunday morning makes your heart sing, or maybe there is a story from the Bible that touches you profoundly. That experience, your experience, is the testimony you have to share. It has to be your own experience, in your own words, or it will be perceived as false testimony. But the story of that experience is the treasure you are called to share.

Such testimony, when it proceeds in dialogue with others and emerges out of genuine care for them, can feel incredibly risky. There is no more frightening thing

in the world than to love, but there is also nothing more potentially creative. When we open ourselves to another human being we expose ourselves. There can be no sharing of genuine faith which does not involve risk.

(slide) If we do not share from a place of vulnerability, then what we share will be distorted version of faith. Perhaps that sense of vulnerability is the real reason why it is so hard for most of us to talk about our faith. But there is nothing good in life which does not involve risk. All that is really worthwhile in life involves putting something we value on the line. Charlotte Bronte once wrote that it is "better to try all things and find all empty than to try nothing and leave your life a blank." This parable teaches that we cannot live as Christ's disciples if we are not prepared to risk, if we are more concerned to conserve than we are to build, more concerned to play it safe than we are to love our neighbours.



"What makes you vulnerable  
makes you beautiful."  
- Brené Brown

*Each* of us has treasure. Each of us *is* treasure. Each of us is called to take that treasure which we have and are and to risk it, for the sake of that greater treasure which comes through a genuine encounter with other human beings and with God. Jesus said that those who would save their lives will lose them, but those who lose their lives for God's sake will genuinely find them. That is the kind of risky, adventurous, entrepreneurial living to which we are called. AMEN.