

“What Are You Doing to Make the World Better?”

Matthew 25:14-30

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
Fine Arts Sunday

Recently, I read two articles in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* that caught my attention. I was struck by their contrast.

One was an article about a suicide bomber in Jerusalem, Ayat Al-Akhras. She was eighteen years old and strikingly beautiful. As a matter of fact, I would not have been surprised had the article been about this young lady winning a beauty pageant.

Ayat was a high school senior with superior grades. She was planning to study journalism at a West Bank university this fall.

Around two o'clock in the afternoon, Ayat went to a neighborhood supermarket. Her friends thought nothing about it as they were leaving school because she said she needed to run an errand. She walked up the steps to the market with another teenager, seventeen-year-old Rachel Levy. Rachel had come to the market for her mother to get some spices for the evening meal. As the two girls walked into the store, a bomb went off killing both girls and a guard. The bomb was attached to Ayat's body.

Ayat left behind a farewell videotape. Her head wrapped in a checked Arab headscarf, she announced that she was a “living martyr” ready to die for Palestine. She did.

The other article in the newspaper was about Allison Bates, daughter of our own Karen and Terry Bates. She is a student at the University of Georgia. She is one of five university students participating in the String Project, designed to encourage music majors to become string teachers and offer affordable instruction to third and fourth graders.

There is a serious shortage of string teachers across the state and nation. In the next two years, five thousand positions for string teachers will go unfilled because of this shortage. As a result, college students are being recruited to teach children and fill in the gaps. Allison is one of those students.

“What a contrast,” I thought as I read these two stories. One young person thought the way to make the world better was by killing people, the other by teaching people. Which one was right?

It doesn't take me long to answer that question, but then I don't live in the Middle East where hatred is rampant and violence a way of life. I wonder how I would feel if I lived there?

I hope I would feel no differently than I do now. For you see, I believe the way to make the world a better place is not by being destructive but constructive. I think the way to make the world a better place is by using God-given talents in ways that honor Him and help others.

Isn't this one of the lessons Jesus taught in the Parable of the Talents? Wasn't he encouraging his readers to use what God had given them to advance the Kingdom of God, which would make the world a better place? I definitely think so.

If this is true, and I believe it is, then how do you do it? How do you use your talents to make the world better? According to this parable, there are three things you

must do. On this day that students from our Fine Arts Academy have so beautifully led us in worship, I want to mention these three things.

First of all, to make the world better you must identify and develop your talents. This is not a time for people to hide behind indifference or an inferiority complex. Our world is crying out for people who will use their talents in healthy ways to balance the evil that is running rampant. This process begins by identifying what the master has given you so that you can cultivate and develop it.

This parable began with the landowner giving three of his servants money for the purpose of multiplying it while he was gone. The emphasis at this point was upon his generosity and trust. He believed in these servants and was willing to invest in them.

God believes in us, too, and has been very generous. To each of us He has given skills, abilities, resources and gifts that can be used to advance His kingdom and make the world better. It is up to us to acknowledge His generosity and be faithful stewards.

You are doing no one a favor by ignoring your talents and hiding behind the cloak of humility. In my opinion, you cannot be humble until you have achieved something. You cannot achieve something until you recognize and develop your talents. If you are going to make the world better, then ask God to reveal what He has placed in your hands, embrace it, celebrate it and give it back to Him fully developed and well worn.

Secondly, to make the world better you must have a lot of courage. This is not a time for people to be timid. Our world needs good people to be bold risk takers.

Two of the servants in this parable multiplied what was given them. The third did not. Why? By his own admission, this servant said he was afraid of how his master would have reacted had he attempted to increase this gift and failed.

This servant's attitude is common, isn't it? I have seen many people refuse to use their talents because they were afraid they might fail.

What can a person do to keep from being paralyzed by fear, especially the fear of failure? Focus on faith not fear. The antidote to fear is faith. As Paul said in Romans 8:31, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" In addition, he said in Philippians 4:13, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength."

Such faith does not blind us to reality but gives us the confidence we need to take risks. This faith does not ignore fear but confronts it and trumps it.

In the late sixties, one of the persons nominated for an Academy Award for best actress was Patricia Neal for her magnificent performance in "The Subject Was Roses." What made this so remarkable was all the adversity she overcame to accomplish this. Her infant son almost died in a car accident, her daughter died suddenly two years later, and shortly after this, Patricia had three strokes and five heart attacks. To say the least, her recovery was a struggle, but she fought back and went on stage again. When asked the secret to her success, Ms. Neal pointed to a plaque on the wall that said, "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there."

I believe courage is a product of faith. If you need more courage, and who among us does not, then increase your faith. Remember, this is not a time to be timid. The world needs us to be bold.

To make a difference in the world, you must have a lot of discipline. This is not a time for people to be lazy, either. That is exactly how the landowner in this

parable saw the third servant, though. In his denunciation of this underachieving servant, he called him wicked and lazy. How humiliating this must have been.

I have never met a productive person who was lazy. I have never known anyone who made his or her world better that was not industrious. Developing and using talents will not happen automatically or instantaneously. It will require will power, determination and lots of hard work.

Most evenings when I leave the church, I walk down the hallway where the Academy of Arts is headquartered. Always, I hear the same thing. I hear instruments being played and voices singing the scale. Day after day and week after week, I see the same people honing their skills. There is nothing glamorous about practicing, especially in a church basement. So, why do these people do this? Developing talents requires discipline, determination and will power. There is no short cut. Never has been and never will be.

A few weeks ago, I told you that I wrote down my mission statement. It is simply this, "To make the world a better place to live." I hope you will join me in that effort and challenge you to evaluate how you are doing. Do you need God to reveal what talents He has given you? Do you need more courage and discipline? That's why we have an invitation. He is waiting for you to ask.