

“Teach us, O Lord, to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.” AMEN!

Pastor Judith Welchel tells of the days
she lived in Milledgeville, GA after
leaving graduate school in social work.

She writes, “I went to work with abused children.

Families there lived in old farm sheds
without plumbing or electricity.

There are no clothes closets nor
free meal kitchens
nor flu shots.

The place is, quite honestly, one in
which it was easy for me
to feel important- so much to be done,
so many needy people,” she said.

“There was a child named Anna.

She was beautiful - rosy dark skin and
piercing black eyes, coupled with a smile
that consumed first her face,
then the room she inhabited.

Her parents were drug addicts.

Anna was one of seven children, all of whom were in foster care.

Parental rights had been terminated, and Anna had been placed for adoption in a home with another four year old girl.

After several months the foster family chose to adopt the other child, leaving Anna somehow doubly orphaned.

The small town of Milledgeville meant that sometimes Anna would see her biological mother walking down the street, and she'd cry from the bus,
"Mama, please come get me!"

Each week at the mental health center, Anna would climb into Judith's lap and they'd read a story together.

Usually after that she'd hop down and go play with the sand table, or the dollhouse, or move to the art supplies.

"But one day," Judith wrote,
" One day she stayed curled up under

my arm on the sofa.

The story was finished.

“Anna are you ready to go play?”
She shook her head.

“It’s good to be held awhile,” Judith offered.

Anna responded, “You are going to have
to hold me for my whole life.” (Pause)

Judith had been attracted to that place
because there was so much for her to do.

Six months into the deal, this little bird
told her that she could do nothing to
remove the deep hole of her trauma.

The question Anna carried though was
if Judith could endure holding some
part of the wound?

“I walked away from that encounter,” she said,
“knowing that I was smaller than
I had presumed - that my mission was
simpler than I had imagined.

And that our communal need for God,

and for one another, is large indeed.” (Pause)

I think it was John Lennon that said,
“Life is what happens to you while
you’re busy making other plans.”

The plans we tend to make are ones that
make us to feel like we are larger than
we actually are and that our
mission is complex.

Suddenly it is life that reveals our mission
to be quite simple when we find our
place below God. (Pause)

Yet, simple missions and humble attitudes
do not come easy to us, and we cling
to the fallacy that people are self-made
and independent individuals.

But that is a big lie,
not one of us is self made,
rugged “Lone Ranger” individual.

All humans, at one time and another,
need another person to survive.

Anna required the support of others
as a disowned child.

Judith did too because she was using
her gifts to hold part of another's wounds.

Maybe that third slave in the parable,
the one who was so foolish as to bury
his talents needed the other two
to support him and show him
the way of mission?

And the same is true today, people need
other people for mutual support
on the life journey. (Pause)

Zephaniah spoke to the reality of the day coming.

He reluctantly brought God's message of
judgment and distress to people.

He, like other prophets, didn't want to do it.

But God pressed upon them because
they'd sinned against the Lord and
had ignored the call to live life without idols
and the call to live life
without selfishness.

The people had decided, like many living today,
that God is both absent and uncaring...

The text says people were
“resting complacently on their dregs.”

In their heart, like in the hearts of many today,
they said, “The Lord will not do good, nor
will the Lord do harm.”

The message to them, and us, is
that distress will come to those who
are complacent and blind.

Complacency is the smug satisfaction with oneself.

Complacency is the opposite of mercy and
“blind” means people who live life not caring
for the well-being of others. (Pause)

Now, before you say... like I sometimes say,
that the God of the Old Testament is mean and
the God of the New Testament is nice,
Jesus springs this parable on us.

Remember the context of his parable.

He spoke privately to his disciples and
he was already in Jerusalem.

The triumphal entry was over.

The cleansing of the temple completed.

The time for Jesus was ticking away
as he told this parable of the talents knowing
he was not going to be around much longer.

At least in the way his followers had
become accustomed to having him around.

No matter the way this parable makes us feel,
the truth remains, we must understand
there are consequences to behavior and
the consequences should disrupt
beliefs that God will do nothing.

(Pause)

The parable tells us two important
things about God and about each other.

The parable tells us that God has
given gifts/talents to each one of us.

Valuable gifts!

One talent was equivalent to 20 years of
wages for a common laborer.

We understand that in the master's

giving of the talents, but it is also clear
in the beginning of the parable where it said,

“The master entrusted his property to the slaves.”

The word property is not only land,
but *all the things the master possessed.*”

It is all entrusted to those who come after.

To the disciples, to the people who nurtured
and cared for us when we couldn't do it ourselves,
for us and for those yet to come.

It's all entrusted to us and
in the parable we are called
to show a return.

The return is not only a financial one,
but a return to God leads us to see
how we need one another and it tells us
we need the people who aren't here.

I don't mean that we need them
to fill vacancies in Sunday School or Council,
or even to bring a tithe to the church,

because the people who aren't here
are working in coffee shops, retail jobs,

idle in gas stations looking for work.

The people who aren't here are performing
the gifts God has given to them and
they're trying to make a return for
the talents entrusted them, but
they're the forgotten/lost/
disconnected.

These are missing the benefits that come
from belonging to a community like St. Stephen.
(Pause)

They are the return Jesus desires.

Don't be fooled into thinking this is
a prosperity gospel promise lesson.

This is a lesson from Jesus that asks
all who come after him, you, me, and all
who seek to follow his name are asked:

Is St. Stephen God's property
entrusted to God's mission?

It takes risk and trust and faith to lay down
treasure for the sake of the gospel.

For the sake of the person who's

fallen through the cracks.

Today is officially our Estimate of Giving Sunday.

Hopefully, everyone has an estimate of giving card.

Many of you have already called
them into Lori and for that, "Thank you!"

If you haven't and today it has
moved upon your heart to fill one out
then take a second, or two,
during the hymn of the day or
during our anthem and
drop it in the plate by the door.

(Pause)

There is support for one another in this place
and a desire to take risks for
the sake of the gospel and the hurting.

Let us not bury the gifts God has given to us.

AMEN!