Giving Back
Here's how we used our talents

On Stewardship Sunday 2007 (December 2, also the first Sunday of Advent), Janet surprised the congregation with a challenge.

She recounted the Parable of the Talents, Jesus’ story of a master “traveling into a far country” (Matthew 25:14-30) who entrusts his servants with his wealth, measured in the ancient unit of talents (a single talent is believed to have been worth at least a year’s work).

One servant was given five talents, and traded with merchants to earn five more. Another was given two, and likewise earned two more. A third was given one talent, but buried it in the ground.

Janet held up some envelopes, each containing $5, and asked who wanted to use the money creatively in God’s service. Hands shot up from all over the church—the pews, the choir stalls, the gallery.

In the Great Hall service, clergy issued the same challenge, offering children envelopes containing $1 bills. Envelopes with a total of $350 were given out at all six services that day.

The goal was not to make a profit, but to give back—to open our hearts and see what might happen.

Children in the Great Hall were asked to tell what they did with their talents and whether anything amazing happened. In the nave, older children, youth and adults were asked how they used the money, if they were surprised by anything and whether they had experienced God in this exercise. In short, everyone was asked to report back—just as in the Gospel.

Some of the reports that follow have been edited for length. Some of our youngest members might have gotten a word or two amiss, but their stories also have an admirable directness—and all of these reports reflect the spirit of the parable.

As in the original story, we learned that our wealth really belongs to someone else.

Our talents belong to God.

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Name: Mac
Age: 7

What did I do with my dollar?
- a newspaper from the homeless

Did anything amazing happen? What was it?
- Yes, made a meal

Felt good

February 3, 2008
I added $4 to the $5 I got in church and my dad added $15. We are going to use it to buy yarn and I'll make hats, scarves and mittens for people in need. I was surprised at how well it works. I can knit. I have money for yarn. And they are people who need what I knit with the yarn that I have the money to buy. I was lying in bed with absolutely no ideas on how to use it so I asked God for help and I suddenly had a huge bursting idea.

_Temitayo Catherine Wolff, age 11_

I gave my dollar to a poor person. Nothing amazing happened but he asked me to bring him a teddy bear after Christmas.

_Jack, age 5_

I used the initial $5, plus $621 more, for the Work of Heart program. It is a program that provides respite foster care to children and foster parents in the D.C. system. I invited 40 people to match St. C's donation; 20 did. Three gave $100 or more. Some gave exactly what was asked, several gave much more. That was the surprise. I expected the Holy Spirit to guide my selection. As I am a public (civil) servant I took a risk in mentioning my challenge to my co-workers, with outstanding results. The Holy Spirit opened people's hearts and (and wallets) to great effect. Thanks be to God!

_Melinda Artman_

I used the $5 and add $20 to support people at Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic where my mother is an active volunteer. I felt surprised that I knew immediately how I wanted to use the money. Yes, I experienced God, by reaching out to help people who are less fortunate, have less and need our help, along with God's help. My family agreed with the donation St. Columba's and the Rankins made!!

_Elizabeth Rankin and Family_

I got food for people who don't have food.

_Robby, age 4_

I was inspired to add $450 to my $5 and use it to buy alternative gifts for my family. I've always focused on pleasing my family with material goods they don't need. This feels risky (how will they respond?), but more true to the spirit of Christmas. Yes, I experienced God! I didn't initially make the connection, but it was about the time I accepted this challenge and fretted over what to do that I was drawn to the alternative gifts.

_James Rostron_

I increased the five “Talents” by “investing” in a private bank with high short-term interest rates. The short answer is that I used the $5 to enable one worthy person to bring joy to many others.

The long answer is that I have a friend, Lorraine Middleton, who is poor and handicapped. To support herself, she spends 80 hours a week schlepping around Prince George’s County as a vocational case manager. For decades, she had made hundreds of cookies and brought them to the elderly, shut-ins and others in need, as well as family members. She thought about not making cookies this year because of the cost. I wish everyone could have seen her radiant smile when I handed her the talents, which she’ll use either for basic supplies or special decorations.

I loved the way the church’s generous act brought forth my own. And I liked the way it allowed me to see Lorraine’s private acts of giving as worthy acts of charity. Did I experience God in this exercise? Yes. Nothing in it was about me. I was simply a conduit.

_Harriet Dwinell_

I put the dollar in my jewelry box. I like to look at it.

_Liza, age 3_

Martha and I were led to each other to be in the story together. We contacted a number of friends and asked if they could collect their loose change that would be added to our $10 and used to purchase Spanish/English copies of the Book of Common Prayer, which would be made available to parishioners at St. Stephen and the Incarnation. Our combined effort maximized the impact of the $10. At last count, after an anonymous matching donation from a St. Stephen's parishioner, we have $280, which will be enough for
14 prayer books. I was surprised by the enthusiasm of those who responded to our invitation to take part in the biblical story.

Linda Yangas and Martha Lockwood

When I got $5, I thought that wasn’t very much money. So, I asked other relatives to match my amount of $5 (I asked everyone using e-mails). I decided to give the money to Bright Beginnings, a place that gives childcare to those who otherwise wouldn’t have any. I ended up raising $85!

I was very surprised by this! I changed $5 into $85! I heard that the #1 way that gets people to donate money is when family or friends ask people to donate! Go figure! I did experience God in this exercise. I learned that with family and friends, you can do anything!

Jack Ward, age 10

I gave it to a homeless woman. It made me feel good.

Molly, age 5

I have an advisor group of the nine 9th graders at St. Andrew’s Episcopal School. I explained where the $5 came from and told the story of the landowner (to a mixed group of Christians, Jews and atheists) and gave each of them 50 cents, plus 50 cents for myself. I suggested that they use the 50 cents toward a bow for the Christmas tree at school. Each bow costs $1, so they would have to contribute “matching funds” in order to buy one. All money from the bow sales goes to help support the Children of Mine Center, run by Hannah Hawkins, in Southeast D.C.

In the end all $5 was donated to charity, plus an extra $4.50. Small potatoes, but the reflection and discussion amongst the kids probably provided the longest-lasting value of the whole exercise. Quite a few of my kids made a point to come up to me and proudly say that they had gone ahead and bought a bow. In previous years, none of my advisees would have thought it important to share that with me.

Phyllis Robinson

I bought a newspaper for the homeless. It made me feel good.

Mac, age 7

With my $5 I purchased a one-pound package of Organic Ethiopian Coffee through Equal Exchange, a program run by Lutheran World Relief. Equal Exchange helps coffee farmers in Ethiopia earn a fair price for their products, have access to affordable credit and gain a long-term trading partner they can trust. For each pound of coffee purchased, Lutheran World Relief makes a contribution to its Small Farmer Fund. So the $5 purchase is helping to make a difference in the lives of several coffee farmers in Africa, probably at least five family farms.

After I purchased the coffee, I donated it to Martha’s Table. The kitchen staff at Martha’s Table tells me that one pound of coffee will make 105 six-ounce servings of coffee for their clients. My estimate:

The $5 helped five African farmers and 105 homeless people here in D.C., for a grand total of 110 people served. It was a joy to be able to come up with a meaningful way to spend this gift and to impact the lives of so many. Surely God was present throughout this exercise, leading me to find ways to enrich the lives of His people.

Bill Riggs

I bought suet for the winter birds. Yes! The birds have started to peck at it immediately.

Langley C., age 7

I help someone get a book in the book fair. They were very happy and surprised.

Marcos, age 9

Inspired by the $5 given for talents, I’ve used my own $15 to buy books for children at Turning Point Shelter, where I volunteer with the Homeless Children’s Playtime Project. Thanks for encouraging us to share our gifts.

Nicole French

Mommy gave someone my dollar and they bought a book in the book fair. They were surprised.

Lucas, age 7
My son was given $5 in the morning. This has been a very interesting exercise for both of us. A time of self-discovery and listening to what God is telling us. It was so hard to come up with a “creative” responsible way to make sure our talents would multiply. I was surprised at how much pressure I put upon myself to make sure it was the “right” and “best” option, instead of just having faith. I was also surprised by the enthusiasm of others to be a part, from the teacher who supplied the recipe to the pet store owner who can’t wait for the upcoming event to offer the treats. I let Graham answer the questions, and we worked on the project together, but I want you to know that I got as much from it as he did. It was a good exercise for us together and individually.

Sharon Gellin

I used the $5 to buy supplies to bake “doggie cookies.” The treats are then brightly packaged and offered to friends and at an adoption event for a donation. The donated money then goes to a pet adoption agency that helps homeless pets find a good home. The cookies can be a present for the person’s dog or can be given to the dogs that need homes.

I was surprised by how good it feels to help the animals. This is a project we would like to continue!! God gave me the inspiration to help animals without families.

Graham Gellin, age 9

I can’t claim to have made more money in terms of cold hard cash, but I think I succeeded in “doing good” and generating some good will with my $5. My daughter Maddy and I invited St. Columbans Yvette Herrera and her daughter Christine over on a dreary cold Sunday afternoon to bake cookies with the supplies we purchased with the $5 (and then some). It was declared a technology-free afternoon and we enjoyed our good old-fashioned cookie-baking party. The girls stayed away from technological devices and the virtual world for a whole afternoon and enjoyed the messy fun of cookie cutting and decorating. I delivered the cookies to Friendship Terrace along with two Christmas cards and am hopeful that the residents there were cheered knowing that [we] are thinking of them and haven’t forgotten them during this busy season.

Leslie Conover

I bought a bunny via Heifer International gave it to a poor family.

Alexandra Provastnik, age 4

I donated toward a share of a bunny through Heifer International.

Theresa Provastnik, age 2

Madeleine and I had seen the article in the paper last week about the area food banks running short of food. That same day I was in Giant and noticed the pages that you can scan in the checkout aisle to donate to the food bank. I just felt drawn to donating $5 that day. It was a very strong pull. I did it remembering the article but completely forgetting about the $5 challenge.

When I came home, I saw [Janet’s] envelope sitting there and told Madeleine that I felt that God had called me to donate to the food bank for our investment. She readily agreed and right away wrote you a lovely note on the paper. It was a great experience for both of us. Thank you.

Elizabeth Pyke, Madeleine Gefke’s mother

I used the $5 to buy Metro tokens for Samaritan Ministry participants to get to their job interviews and their first one or two weeks on the job before they receive their first paycheck. God led me to ask about the needs at Samaritan Ministry and particularly whether the caseworkers had enough money to supply participants tokens for their commute to interviews.

Philip Graham

I leveraged additional funds from my parents and made a contribution through DonorsChoose.org to help a kindergarten class in D.C. (95 percent poverty level). I got music and story CDs, so they can learn in ways that I do, too. I hope it will help some kids who don’t have as much I do.

Christopher Brainard, age 3
(with a little parental help)

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Elizabeth Pyke, Madeleine Gefke’s mother
We donated it to a food bank because we saw the article in the newspaper yesterday. My Mom showed the article to me and we saw the opportunity to donate to a food bank on the same day. I experienced God in this exercise because I read the article and could give money to solve it.

Madeleine Gefke, age 9

We had much ideas. I wanted to go to the airport and ask the driver to fly up to God. But my daddy told me planes don’t fly to heaven. We talked about what to do and I picked to give the dollar to people who don’t have heat like we do for their house and little kids.

Emory Lewis, age 4

I bought a spatula for a needy family

Hope, age 2

I used the $5 as the beginning of the “pot.” Instead of office gifts for Christmas, each person donated $5, which was then given to Rebuilding Together for a total of $55. I was surprised by how easy it was. God was all over this endeavor!

Joan Tannenbaum

I put my $5 on Kiva.org. I was surprised that a little amount of money can start a small business in poor countries. I am now a member of Kiva and when this loan is repaid, I will lend the money to someone else. When the children of Israel were walking in the water, God led them and we are loaning money to strangers and giving them to help.

Isabel Suarez, age 8

I used my $5 to buy cans for the homeless. I experienced God by giving food to the poor.

Matthew S., age ?
(last name undecipherable, alas)

I was surprised by how easy it was. God was all over this endeavor!

Cecelia Carchedi, age 10

I donated my $5 to STEP to be used to buy a gift package for a college student. It was received with great thanks. I was happy to be able to assist in my small way through St. Columba’s. May God continue to bless this parish. I got verbal pledges to assist this ministry so when they honor them, I’ll bring them in.

Roselyne Gombe

My mom gave me a dollar to match it with another one. Now we are going to give it to the poor. I’m going to be helping someone who really needs help.

Allie Mwanjala, age 8

My family and I have been making contributions to Heifer International for the last several years. I love Heifer’s stories and the work they do, but I am especially drawn to their emphasis on having recipients of Heifer grants pass along some of the fruits of their gift to others in the community. This year, your $5 went out with our annual family contribution to support a Heifer activity in Kenya called the Kimisha Mwangaza Women’s Group project. With the help of this contribution, 18 women will receive in-calf heifers, and then pass on year-old heifers to the remaining 18, who will pass on their heifers’ first female offspring to a new group that will be started in the area. The project has now been fully funded; I look forward to following its progress!

Elizabeth Vaden

I bought a pan for a needy family.

Anonymous, age 5

You said to tell you what we did with the $5 you gave in church, so I am saying I added it to the $135 that I am sending to Mississippi to make a playground for a school my mom’s friend works at.

Rachel, age ?
My wife, Linda, accepted your talents at the 8 am service one week ago. First, I donated the talents to a bucket being collected by two Naval ROTC students at the Foggy Bottom/GWU Metro stop. They were collecting for “Toys for Tots” on a very cold, icy day. They were doing well by the community in very difficult weather and their objective was to do good. Second, we multiplied the talents many fold and sent a contribution to an organization that sends small Christmas packages to troops in combat or high-risk areas. The troops are helping support the country and deserve our support too. We are still looking for other ways to use the resources but wanted you to know we have made some progress.

William C. Handorf

I added my sister’s, my brother’s and my $5 to the $5 in the envelope that I got from Janet. And then I used the $20 to buy a flock of chicks from Heifer International. It is going to make a family without food to not be starving because the chicks are going to grow up into adults and lay eggs. Then the kids and the moms and dads will get the eggs and sell some of the chickens. They will have money to buy things that they need.

Cameron Jones, age 6½

I gave my dollar to the Salvation Army to help feed hungry people.

Isaac Taylor, age 4½

First, I must say that Janet’s request for Five Talents’ volunteers came seconds after I had prayed to be strengthened towards more community outreach. My hand just floated into the air to indicate my willingness to participate. I read and reread the challenge. I asked six friends what they would do. I am not particularly risk adverse, when I can calculate my potential loss, so I really wanted to take a risk—a risk that I might not see anything further and would “lose” everything. After a great deal of thought and prayer and following a discussion with Emily Gowdy Canady, I decided to “bank” on the St. C’s high school group.

I expanded the possibility of good by offering $10 each to the first 20 volunteers who would accept the same challenge. [Only 10 youth were in YAC/Senior Class that day, so each was given $20.]

I concluded that where else might “good” be passed on than via such a talented, creative group. Further, in directing an opportunity to our young people, I wanted to reinforce the Christian belief in love and reaching out and our Christmas focus on spirituality. The story of the Five Talents is wonderfully provocative.

Elinor Talmadge

Here are a few ways in which St. C’s youth accepted Elinor’s challenge:

- Well . . . with the $20, I bought various toiletries such as deodorant, toothpaste, etc. I will be giving them to Christ House, which is a shelter that houses and provides medical care for homeless people. Thanks! It was a great experience.

Maddy Brown
I felt like I had made a small difference in their lives for a day and that felt good, like I had a little power to change something.

- My school (Sidwell Friends) was collecting shoe boxes full of toiletries to distribute to those in need during the holiday season. I used the $20 to buy a toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, soap and deodorant for a man, while my mom donated another $20 so that I could buy the same items for a woman.

  Chris Williams

- My friend was selling t-shirts in order to raise money for an orphanage in Uganda through her church, so I bought one (they were $15, and I donated the remainder to her cause) and I plan to give it to my mom for Christmas.

  Chris Ewing

- With my $20, I helped a woman in Uganda. Her name is Christine Nambajje. She owns a bakery and also sells secondhand clothes. She is a single mother and takes care of her six children as well as her brother’s children. I gave her a loan through two organizations, BRAC and Kiva.org. Kiva gives loans to people in the developing world. Once you donate, your money stays in the system. So once Ms. Nambajje has paid back my loan, I get to give the money again to someone else in need. BRAC is an organization started in Bangladesh to empower women in poor places by giving them a basic medical education and helping them to start businesses to help their community. So God’s $20 is going to help this lady and her children, and then someone else.

  Eva Suarez

- I broke it into two $10 bills and gave them to two homeless people lying on the sidewalk outside the Tenleytown Metro stop. I was surprised by how graciously they accepted it. It was cold and dark in the place they were lying, but they were cheerful and relaxed. Of course they said thank you, but they also wished me a blessed Christmas. I don’t know if I experienced God or not, but I felt like I had made a small difference in their lives for a day and that felt good, like I had a little power to change something.

  Emmet Frail

I have written a check for $130 to the Children of Mine Center founded by Hannah Hawkins. It is an after-school program in Anacostia and is a place for young people to go after school as an alternative to being out on the streets. She doesn’t do any major advertising or soliciting. I know this small sum will be used just as I had intended . . . to do something good. Alaster learned about the Children of Mine Center years ago when he was teaching at St. Andrew’s and we have supported it ever since. The thank-you notes we get from Hannah Hawkins are beyond heartfelt.

  P.S. Tonight a friend put another $20 through my mail slot for my $5 endeavor! So I am sending Children of Mine $150, not $130. What kind people have helped me with this, mostly friends . . . they all believed in the cause. A very satisfying experience.

  Sue MacDonald

I’m giving my dollar to a child who needs a toy for Christmas. We’ll see if anything amazing happens.

  Giovanni Cervigni-Millon, age 5
I started out with grandiose expectations, waiting for a creative epiphany. But the days passed and nothing came to me.

At the 11th hour, I decided to involve my 4-year-old niece, Caroline Swett, in the project (I am one of her godmothers, and I take her to Sunday School at St. C’s). I explained to her that I had $5 to give to someone who needed it, and asked her to help me. We had a little conversation about poverty, and she told me that being poor means “not having enough,” and that is sad. I suggested we look for someone without a home, maybe at the Metro. We passed by the Tenleytown Metro, and there was one man, sitting against the wall by the escalator, looking through his belongings. We drove around the block and parked.

I had taken the $5 out of the envelope for Caroline to hand to the man, but she insisted that it be in the envelope, which was a better plan, I think. She carried it happily as we walked to the Metro entrance. I asked what we would say to the man as she gave him the envelope. “This is for you because you’re poor,” Caroline suggested. I didn’t think that would go over very well. I said we didn’t want to embarrass the man, so what about something like “this is for you from St. Columba’s.” She thought that was okay.

First lesson for me: How do you give without being patronizing? I remember a wise observation from our then Senior Warden, Linda Yangas, years back, about needing to be aware of our own poverty while we make outreach offerings.

When we got to the Metro, the man we’d first noticed from the car had been joined by two others. A dilemma: Who should receive the envelope? I asked Caroline to whom she wanted to make the gift, and she pointed to the man we’d first seen. Then she suddenly became shy and whispered to me to talk for her. So we approached the three men together, and as Caroline extended the envelope to the first man, I said “Hi, I’m Marjorie, and this is Caroline, and we would like you to have this, from St. Columba’s.”

There was a wonderful moment as Caroline looked at him, smiling, and he looked down at her—he has beautiful blue eyes—with a slight smile and an expectant expression, and took the envelope. “What’s this? Thank you, thank you.” “What is your name?” I asked. “Bob,” he replied. “You’re welcome, Bob. Good wishes to you. Take care.” The other two men crowded close to see. What struck me was that they seemed excited for him, not envious, no sense of “Hey! What about me,” which would have been so understandable. Instead, they conveyed generosity and selflessness in that moment. Lesson No. 2.

Looking back, I regret not asking their names as well. I asked Caroline later what she thought about the experience. She said, “Before I gave Bob the envelope, he looked like this [she made a grim face]; and then after, he looked like this [smiling and brightening].”

I’m not sure what this outing really meant to Caroline, or if she’ll think of it again. But I will. I’m left pondering the difficulty of making choices with finite resources. The injustice and inequity of this. And the complexity of giving—what it means to be the giver, what it means to be the receiver. How delicate a transaction it is because of all the underlying power dynamics that can be triggered; and the associated feelings, like smugness, resentment, condescension, humiliation that can overwhelm and displace empathy and gratitude. All the expectations and the “shoulds” that can be imposed by both parties.

You asked the talent-bearers whether they experienced God in this exercise. For me, God was especially in the brief connection between child and man, in the supportive good cheer of the friends for the one receiving. And then, in reflecting on the whole experience afterwards.

Thank you for this opportunity, Janet. Blessings to you for this New Year.

Marjorie Swett

Editor: Kathleen Stanley; Graphic Design: Jennifer King Creative; Photos: Wayne C. Fowler; Transcription: STEP/I Have a Dream participant Ka Lam