

Enrique Barrera
Homily
Mass of Christian Burial
September 3, 2007
Rev. David Garcia

It was Thanksgiving Day 1999 and here at San Fernando we were celebrating our annual Interfaith service giving thanks to God for the great diversity of our city and how that diversity has been a true blessing. At the end of the service attended by many religious and community leaders, I pulled Enrique to the side and told him that Archbishop Flores had said there was no problem with his being nominated for City Council. Enrique had approached me a few weeks before to see if there was any conflict between his diaconal ministry and political office. I remember distinctly his reaction when I told him he was free to pursue the appointment. He looked like Christmas had come early for him. His eyes lit up and I could feel the excitement he experienced at that moment. He knew this was going to be among the biggest challenges and toughest journeys he had ever faced, yet he was eager to do it, eager to give all that he had, and in addition still serve the Church by continuing to be a deacon here at San Fernando.

At 62 years of age, some people are retired, some start Social Security, and many just wait around and coast to retirement. Not Enrique. There was too much he could do for others with this new opportunity, and he was eager to get going.

I thought of that story as I remembered him these last few days. This past Saturday, the day after Enrique died, the gospel reading given for the morning Mass is the one we just heard proclaimed, the gospel of the two people who used the talents given them and produced more talents, and the one who simply buried his talent and did nothing. Matthew was writing this story for the first generation of Christians, who had understood Jesus would return soon for them. Jesus had lived and died and was raised and then ascended into heaven with the promise to return. Many thought it was imminent and they stopped their regular lives, their work, and just waited around for Jesus, not doing much of anything. Matthew felt strongly that the best way to wait for Jesus was to be alert and active, to use the gifts and talents God had given them for the benefit of the community, and if Jesus returned, they would be ready to meet him and give a good account of their service, and if he did not return for some time, so be it. There was still His work to do on earth.

The interesting part of the parable concerns the one who buried his talent and did nothing. The gospel says he buried his talent because of fear. Was he afraid of criticism for his actions? Or was it jealousy that he did not get the talents that the others got? Or did he fear people making fun of him? Maybe he feared that he might fail? Whatever his fear, he did not use his talent and the master accepted no excuses.

In one of the media interviews I did Friday, the reporter asked what I would remember most about Enrique. At that moment it struck me that with all Enrique had done for the community as an educator, civil servant, deacon and city council person, I could not remember him getting much honor or acclamation for his work. He was more interested in what the gospel shows us, namely in giving back whatever talents he had been given and not seeking any particular recognition or even thanks.

This to me is the best kind of public servant, the one who knows what he or she has, and gives it for the betterment of others without any expectation of rewards, honors or promotions. That is especially true, if the service is to those who have not received much from society. But really, the gospel is not speaking only about public servants or other leaders. The gospel is written for all of us. This parable says we will all be judged by the use of our talent. You don't have to be on a board of directors or a city council or even ordained church leadership to serve. All are called to give of what they have for the community. The only recognition that counts is the one Enrique is now getting from God.

The main obstacle to using our talents, according to the gospel, is fear. Yet over and over again throughout scriptures we hear the words, "Do not be afraid." They often come from God's direct words or Jesus himself, sometimes from prophets, angels or other divine messengers. Someone once told me that phrase, "Do not be afraid" occurs 365 times in the scriptures. I guess that

means there is one “Do not be afraid” for every day of the year. We have no excuses, no, not any day.

Enrique used all his “Do not be afraid” this past year fighting cancer with the same faith and commitment that he applied to his community and church involvement. His final year, mostly sick, was as much an example to us as all his active years.

“Don’t be afraid,” Enrique tells us today. Don’t be afraid to step forward. Don’t be afraid of doing the right thing, especially for those who need our help the most. Don’t be afraid if they make fun of you. Don’t be afraid of criticism or failure. The master has given us all the talent we need.

I come back, finally, to the story of Thanksgiving 1999 when Enrique’s eyes lit up on learning he could serve on the council. A few days before he died I had a quiet private moment with Enrique at the hospice unit when everyone left us alone for a few minutes. I simply asked him, “Enrique, are you ready to go?” He nodded his head slowly and whispered faintly, “Yes, I am ready.” Enrique’s son also told me just a few hours before Enrique died, he was still responsive, even opening his eyes wide for a moment when asked to do so. The same light that I remember from 1999 came to his eyes to signal he was ready to get on with the next challenge, the final journey. My brothers and sisters, once again, Christmas has come early for Enrique.