

Rev. Bernie Weber, cp
Wisdom 6:12-16
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18
Matthew 25:1-13

32ND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
November 6, 2011

Before I start, I want to share with you two things: one, I never use notes; and two, I never look at my watch. You get the idea.

The first thing I want to point out about the scripture here is that Jesus is talking to his disciples. His disciples are friends. He calls them friends later. He said I do not call you slaves, I call you friends because a slave doesn't know what his master's about. Jesus is giving them warning of how it really is. And he's giving a warning so they don't become foolish, and say, well, I'm waiting for Christ to return. He hasn't so I might as well go back to a worldly way of life.

So what I want to do is tell you the stories of two people. One happens to be a man; the other happens to be a woman. I'll cut out a lot of the details because of time limitations. Both are true stories. They both really happened, and they are a demonstration of what God wants us to know.

The first was a man named Charles Stetcher. I was stationed in our parish in Chicago. I was a deacon at the time, and I would go to the Catholic hospital called Resurrection down the road and visit patients of our parish. I came across the man Charles. He was sitting in his chair. He was the nicest man. We had a very pleasant talk. Since I was a deacon, I blessed him and I said, "Well, I'll see you next week," because it didn't look like he was ready to go home. He said, "Well, if I'm still here." I said, "Oh, maybe you will be going home." He said, "No, I might be dead." He was serious. He had esophageal cancer. There was no hope. And he was literally waiting for the time.

But what I want to tell you is that the time up to this point, he was like the wise virgins. He was preparing for this time. He spent his life in loving and in service. Later his widow told me at his wake service, he was the most loving man she had ever known. It was God and family first, and everyone else second. And I came to know this personally and that's why I want to tell you the story.

So I came next week and he was there. I came back the third week, and he was still sitting in his chair. He said, "I don't know why God's taking so long. I'm ready." He didn't want to die, folks, but he was ready. He had spent his life as

Jesus wanted him to. He had spent his life as Jesus is calling us to. Living the gospel in his life – as a married man, as a working man, as a family man.

The fourth time I came to visit, it was a totally different story. I came to his room and the door was almost totally shut. I knocked. I came in, and I was horrified to see what I saw. Here's this man lying in bed, the cancer was just ravaging his body in just one week. He had nothing through his mouth for over a month and a half, and now nothing was being assimilated. His face was like a concentration camp victim. He's laying there and I saw him and I didn't know what to say, so I said, "Charles, is there anything I can do for you?" You know what his answer was? "No." And then – and I'll never forget these words. He looked at me and said, "Is there anything I can do for you?" That's how the man spent his life – what can I do for you? And here on his death bed, he can't even lift his arms; he's saying the same thing. And God gave me the answer, and I'm going to tell you what it was. I said, "Yes Charles, when you get up there, put in a good word for me." He said, "I'll do it." I blessed him and I left knowing this would be the last time that I'd see him.

When I came back the following week, I was walking towards the hospital, and being a deacon at that time was like cloudy, rainy weather. There was no joy. No thrill of serving the Lord. And all of a sudden, halfway to the hospital, it was like the sun came out, my spirits shot up. Suddenly I felt like a new person, rejuvenated in spirit and mind and heart. And I looked at my watch. I'm not looking at it now. I looked at my watch. It was two-thirty, Wednesday afternoon. And I said to myself, "Charles, you kept your word!" Sure enough. I get to the hospital. Now his door is shut. I ask the nurse. I told them who I was looking for. They said, "I'm sorry, he just expired."

When I was at that wake service, I talked to his widow and I happened to ask her what time did Charles die? She said, "Two thirty, Wednesday afternoon." And I told her what happened to me. And what he said to me. And she was so happy to know that her beloved husband was now with God. And God showed that through me, and I was able to convey it to her. That is the wise virgin, folks. You don't know when. He knew he was going to die sometime. But up to the time he found out he had cancer and ended up in the hospital, he thought he was healthy. He didn't expect to die this young in his sixties.

Now I tell you the second story. Again, I'm making it short. It may not be short to you...believe me it is to me. A year before this I was Brother Bernie. I used to be a math teacher. I taught in LA and Hawaii for five years, and then I joined the Passionists. I was visiting the same hospital, and I was visiting one of our parishioners – a saintly woman, Miss Marone – but she had a roommate that was far from saintly. She was sitting in that corner of her room – I'm sorry folks, it's

not you – it’s just that’s where she was. She was sitting there...I called her Miss Ice Box to myself. There was just cold emanating from her. She was just sitting there grouchy and oh my gosh – I just uhhhgg. I was new at it. I don’t feel that way now as a priest, but I did then. And I thought to myself when I was ready to leave, thank goodness I don’t have to talk to her! But God heard my thoughts.

I went back one more time. Miss Marone was there. But the very first time I met her, I want to share this with you, she was in her seventies and reminded me of Mother Theresa. She said, “Brother, I’m not worried about myself. I’m worried about my daughter. She’s one floor above me in intensive care. She is very, very sick. She has children. If God wants one of us, take me! I’m ready! But spare my daughter.” I said, “Miss Marone, God doesn’t have to take either one of you.” So it was a Saturday morning. I came to visit at the hospital. Miss Marone’s bed is empty. Miss Ice Box is sitting there as cold as ever. And I looked at her and without even thinking, I said, “What happened to Miss Marone.” “She went home!” I thought to myself where there’s no sense staying around here. I’m leaving. And God spoke. He said talk to that woman. That’s all he said. He didn’t tell me what to say. He just said talk to her.

I said since Miss Marone went home, mind if I talk to you? Oh go ahead! (in gruff voice). I talked to her. “Nice weather isn’t it?” That’s all I said, and she took over. Her face suddenly changed from just angry and grouchy to sadness, almost started crying. And she figuratively, for the people who don’t know what figuratively means, it means as a matter of speech – she spilled her guts. She made a confession of the past 44 years. And it wasn’t pretty. It was very, very ugly. And the thing that I remember, she said she ran her husband into the grave. I could understand that. She alienated all her children. I could understand that. She had absolutely no friends. I could understand that! She was just bossy and pushy and demanding. She gave up God. She was Catholic. Hadn’t been to confession in 44 years. Hadn’t been to mass, communion, nothing. She lived like there was no tomorrow, that there was no reckoning, and there was no God. And she’s just pouring it out. When it came to the end, I looked at her. Here’s the Holy Spirit at work again. I said, “All your life (basically the last 44 years), you have controlled others. Now you’re angry because you cannot control God.” She said, “You’re right.”

I was shocked. I said, “Do you want Jesus Christ to forgive you all your sins?” I mean the Holy Spirit’s leading me now. I could have said lady you’re going to hell and walked out. But here’s the point I want to make folks. God is merciful, but don’t be presumptuous. Don’t be like her. Don’t think well God will be merciful so at the last minute I’ll just say God I’m sorry and that’s it. She said yes; she wanted Jesus to forgive her sins. I said, “Do you want Jesus Christ to come into your heart?” He hadn’t been there in 44 years and I don’t even know if he was

there before! Her heart was so cold, icy, so blocked. And you see, when we're blocked with sin, we're loaded up with sin, in a sense – this is imagery – there's no room for Jesus. Now there was. She had spilled her lousy sins. She gave them up. She wanted Jesus to forgive her. And even better still, she wanted Jesus to come back into her heart.

Well, I wasn't a deacon. I couldn't bless her. I wasn't a priest so I prayed with her. I prayed her act of contrition for her. There was no more coldness. I didn't feel a sense of ugliness and repulsion. There was peace. So I got up and I said, "Would you make me a promise?" She said, "What's that?" "Will you promise me you'll go to confession the first chance you get when you leave here?" She said, "I promise." And I left.

Now let me tell you what I found out. That night at home, Miss Marone died in her bed, in her sleep. And the next day, Sunday, her daughter suddenly took a turn for the better, because her daughter was a member of our parish. Her deal with God was honored. She gave her life for her daughter, just like Jesus gave his life for all of us. That night, in her sleep, the former Miss Ice Box died. And when I heard that, I had chills kind of go up and down my spine. I realized God was giving her one final chance, and she took it. And he used me as the instrument. And he can use you as his instrument as well. I was only Brother Bernie, and I wasn't a real brother. I wasn't an artificial brother in a sense, because I was in vows, but I intended to be a priest.

I have never forgotten either of these. That's what this message is all about. Jesus is saying to all of us, myself included, don't slack off. Don't think you're going to live forever. Don't just say "Ah! I can go out and have some fun and live in the world and drink and do this and carouse and...you know." You never know. So let's follow Charles Stetcher, and let's thank God that there was mercy for that woman. It was a close call. Did she go right to heaven like Charles? I doubt it. As far as I'm concerned she probably went to finishing school. She had a lot to make up.

So that's my message. Believe it or not, I cut it short. It's a very important message. I hope you will think about it. I hope if you have children who are not going to church, who are living as if there is no heaven, no hell, no God, that you share the stories with them. That's how God uses me to reach people – all the stories that I have seen. I've been a priest a little over 30 years. There are so many I can't remember them all, but I shared today just two of them so that all of us may be touched by God. Thanks for listening. God bless.