

A few days ago, some of you have received an email from me which was about a CNN article. I was reading a news article and this story got my attention and I sent the information to share. Banafsha, an 11 year old girl, living in KABUL, Afghanistan, is the oldest child of her family. Her father is a drug addict; her mother cannot work because of her many young children to take care of. So this poor 11-years-old goes out into the streets to beg for some bread. Without the bread that she begs from strangers, she, her sisters, her baby brothers and her mom would all go hungry.

She says: "My two younger sisters also work. They beg for bread and sell gum. There's no choice." "A few days ago, some girls were kidnapped around here, and many people have gone missing," Banafsha says. She prays every day: "I say, 'God, take me out of this poverty and have my father go work so I can go to school.' "

There is a school nearby run by a nongovernment organization; but donations are not enough and many kids go hungry at school too. So they rather go out into the streets to beg. (Nov. 14, 2008 article)

I know Afghanistan is a war zone. We are spending hundreds of million dollars every day. In the midst of all that, we hear this heart breaking story.

Just picture an 11-year-old girl walking in her worn blue plastic sandals, holding her bag tight, and eyeing who will help and who will not, in the war torn city.

When I saw a picture of this exhausted beautiful girl on internet, I just couldn't move on. I had to stop right there to think.

Especially, for me as someone who has a child around that age, I felt terrible. I wished I could do something for her.

Sure, we hear about the problems here in this country too. People sleep on the streets in our neighborhood. But for some reason, this girl's story hit me harder than anything else.

I know a retired Korean minister who used to serve churches here in the Bay Area and now lives in Southern California. Having retired, he seems to spend a lot of time on internet. I happen to be on his long email list. Let me tell you, literally every week, he sends me all kinds of pictures and articles. Sometimes it is too much, but what are you going to do? That is his hobby and I do not want to tell him to stop sending me those. Sometimes I just do not bother to open those emails.

But a couple of weeks ago, he sent me a pile of old pictures which I did open. But this time I was glad I opened his email. I don't know where he got them; the pictures were taken by an American GI during the Korean War. I just cried over those pictures; among the pictures were children without shoes begging for food; women in rugged clothes with little children in a long line in a small Methodist Church yard where American GIs was distributing gums, chocolates, and other relief goods.

So when I saw the picture of the little Afghan girl the other day things came full circle.

Today, our Old Testament text talks about a terrible situation the Israelites were in at a point of their history. Judges is not a popular book in the Bible; people don't even know what the book is about. But the book is basically about the struggles Israelites had.

Right after Joshua's death they did not have a leader, one symbolic figure who could bring together all different tribes in the midst of all the challenging issues around them.

While they were still in the process of conquest of the Promised Land, they were unable to win the wars with native people in the region. And generations passed, and the younger Israelites turned away from God, and intermarried with the local people and worshipped their gods.

In this process, a series of judges, or rulers, or soldiers, were called to act as temporary leaders for the people. They were preachers/judges/ command-in-chiefs. But whenever one judge died, people committed even greater evil.

So I would say this was the Dark Age in the history of Israel.

Basically, Israelites were the underdogs; they did not have military powers; their morale was low; their religion was corrupt; but they were still in the war; you cannot go back; in fact, they did not have a place to go back; they had to live there; for that they had to win the battles; that was the only option; but no one wanted to take center stage in this kind of crisis. There was no hope; there was not a chance for them to get through!

The world was turning upside down. Nothing seemed to work the way it was meant to.

Just picture the little Afghan girl; where is the future? Where is hope? You do not even have time to cry; you don't have that luxury!

Wow!

Some of you may have been there.

I remember those days thirty some years ago. While I was in high school, my mother had to do whatever she could to put food on the table for her kids. My mother walked home one hour from and to the work to save a bus fare. One time I remember my mother crying silently not knowing what to do; her kids were young and everything was on her shoulders. I graduated from high school but was diagnosed with Tuberculosis. Everything went from bad from worse!

I cried. But my mother didn't have time to cry. Those were was the darkest moments of my life!

But I can tell you this with confidence: God was there with me. Each time I was pushed to the limit in my life, God also provided a way-out for me. That is my story; that is my witness to you.

We live in a world which seems hopeless. But there is always hope and that hope comes from God.

Many times, the way God works seems like a joke.

In today's text, we hear a very unusual story. It sounds like a joke even today. It says God was using a woman named Deborah as Israel's new leader to their enemy. Deborah was not a soldier; in fact, we don't know much about her; that means she was just a woman, a wife of someone.

But there was one thing clear: she was a person of faith, a prophetess; people used to come to her for prayers and spiritual guidance. And this woman was used by the hand of God to save the country. Praise the God!

Up until a few months ago, people were excited talking about the possibility of a woman becoming a president. That was a big story.

But imagine Deborah being the leader of Israelites 3000 years ago.

Certainly, that is the Good News; God makes us laugh; what seems impossible to us is really possible to God.

That makes us hope in this hopeless world.

Let's now turn to our Gospel lesson. Many of us know about this popular "Talent" story.

One thing I find from this story is this: it really tells us how things are in the world. Whether it is because of their ability or their luck or their family background, whatever, people are given different gifts and talents. But it is clear that what they have is not theirs; they belong to the Master; they are all stewards; they are all given this opportunity to manage those talents.

And everyone is accountable for what they are doing with their talents. The issue is not how many you have; it is how faithful you are to the owner's wish.

Then, what is the owner's wish? You may say it is multiplying your talents! Sure, I agree.

But what do you mean by multiplying in Matthew's context?

For this, you need to see the big picture. You need to read before and after today's text. In this case, the answer of the whole book is found in verses 35-40.

The theme of the Gospel of Matthew is a church as the household of justice. That means, the followers of Jesus Christ is to pay attention to the needs of the least in our society. Jesus says: 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

In Matthew 25, Jesus is giving his final sermons on his way to the cross; chapter 26 is the beginning of his passion story. And today's Talent story is also part of his return.

Jesus says he will be back. We don't know when. But when he comes back, the Son of Man will see how we have been faithful to his command.

Time goes quickly; history is made every moment; but human life seems to be always challenging. People were crying for help not knowing where to go 3000 years ago in the Promised Land.

Children are on the streets begging for food in Afghanistan and here in our neighborhood, while a lot of us are struggling to get through our own hardships.

But there is a hope for those who turn their eyes to God.

But there is a greater hope for those who, even in the midst of their own hardships, try to be faithful to Jesus' command.

And the command is: "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, quench the thirsty, and welcome the strangers." Amen.