

Celina Mariseth Ramos was 16 years old when her parents worked for the Jesuits at the University of Central America in San Salvador. Her mother Elba was a housekeeper, and her father Obdulio was a watchman and gardner. Celina was in high school. Their home had just been bombed during the Salvadoran Civil War, so Celina and her mother were sleeping in a small room in the Jesuit residence while her father stayed at the guardhouse.

The military government was fighting a coalition of guerrillas, resulting in horrific violence. By the end, over 70,000 people had died, and over 8,000 more had “disappeared”. Half a million were displaced within the country, and another half million became refugees elsewhere. El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America; the population is about 6 million. The US government supported the Salvadoran military government, which contributed to the oppression.

The Jesuits at the university had been speaking out in favor of the rights of the poor. Exactly 25 years ago, on November 16, 1989, one week after the fall of the Berlin Wall brought joyful liberation in another part of the world, a death squad of the Salvadoran army entered the Jesuit residence in San Salvador. They had orders to kill the president of the university, Father Ignacio Ellacuría, and to leave no witnesses. When they tried to break open the front door, the priests opened it for them. The soldiers forced the Jesuits to lie face down in the back garden while they searched the house. The assassins shot and killed all six priests, their housekeeper Elba, and her 16-year old daughter Celina. Obdulio discovered their bodies the next day, his wife’s arms wrapped around his daughter. I’ve made two trips to El Salvador. I’ve seen the Jesuit residence, the garden, and the roses that Obdulio planted.

All of those who died were in that building because they were using the talents God had given them. Most were scholars who studied social justice and spoke out about it. The Ramos family used their gifts to give the Jesuits a clean, pleasant house for their study, prayer and community. Jesus’ parable about the talents tells about the rewards we get from sharing what God gives us. If you use your talents well, God will give you even more. We all have experience of this. When you help people in a time of need, when you carry a load, fix their house, or visit the sick, you feel better, and you have even more energy, not less.

What the parable does not say is that sometimes those talents put you in danger. Sometimes God gives you words to say or actions to perform that will disturb the powerful. God may pick you for an important task in your family, your neighborhood, or your school. It may seem hard to do, but God has probably already given you the talents you need for it. Sometimes, even by doing something very ordinary, like cleaning a house or tending a garden, your actions may be remembered forever because you were doing just what God wanted you to do at the right time.

You may ask, “Who did God make me to be?” God has made each of us for a certain time and place, and has endowed us with special gifts. Throughout our lives we continue to discover what those talents are and to use them. When we do, even in times of strife, we will please God and experience fulfillment.