

November 13, 2005
26th Sunday after Pentecost
Preacher: Dr. Mari G. Irvin

Texts:

Hebrew Lesson: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalmody: Psalm 90

Christian Reading: I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Holy Gospel: St. Matthew 25:14-30

I wish before I agreed to preach today I had looked at the Gospel text a bit more closely. As I began to prepare for this sermon, I quickly realized that this hardly seems to be a text for a novice, non-theologically educated, and only-very-occasional preacher. But here I am, and with the grace of God, I trust that the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart will be acceptable.

The story that we've just heard in the Gospel reading seems to be rather simple, albeit dismal, and many have preached on it at that level, if some of the considerable number of sermons available on the Web are any indication. The message seems to be: Everyone receives "talents" from God; everyone is called upon to use them; and if you don't do that right, you'll be in big trouble. Seems pretty clear.

But perhaps there is more to this story about an extremely wealthy landowner who before he goes on a journey entrusts to each of three servants a vast amount of money, five, two and one talent respectively. I've learned that a single "talent" at the time, a valuable chunk of precious metal weighing perhaps as much as 90 pounds, would be recognized by Jesus' listeners as representing nearly twenty years of work for a servant. So the least amount any servant was given, the one talent, represented more money than that person would earn throughout the remainder of his life, and undoubtedly more money than Jesus and his listeners had personally seen.

It will be helpful to us if we remember that this story is a "parable," a narrative device used frequently by Jesus to engage his listeners. I've learned that parables by definition are open to various interpretations. One writer described a parable as "a riddle to be solved;" another described it as "a series of assertions that are really questions in disguise." Will Herzog, a theologian who has written much about Jesus' use of parables, disputed the commonly provided definition of a parable as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning," claiming instead that they are "earthly stories with heavy meanings."

The parables used by Jesus both concealed and revealed his messages about the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Jesus recognized in using this favorite teaching method, that many people, the merely curious folks and the critics who attempted to trap him with difficult questions, would not understand his use of these short stories with their hyperbole and often unexpected endings. They would soon shrug and turn away. But the truth-seekers who both heard and listened would engage with Jesus, struggle to work through the apparent contradictions, and go home, in this instance, continuing to think about oppression and justice and how God would run the world.

Our task, as it is for all who listen to Jesus is, as one writer stated, “to crack the nut of the parable and get to the meaty part inside.” If we are to discern the meaning of any parable, it is important for us to understand it, in part, as a social commentary of a specific time and place, not as a reflection of life in 21st century. In reading this particular parable we must take special care not to impose the values of an entrepreneurial culture and economy upon the interpretation as some have done, even using this parable as a text for academic lectures on venture capitalism!

The images evoked by Jesus in his parables were familiar to his listeners, many of whom were peasants trying to survive in a culture that regarded them as means to other people’s ends. Who would the listeners identify with? How would the people who listened to this story perceive the landowner, given that most of the truth-seeking listeners were persons close to the bottom of the economic and social registers of the day? They clearly must have recognized that the landowner was a profiteer, a person who exploited others to obtain and maintain his wealth. Further, the most likely way that the first and second servants doubled the funds given to them was through investing with bankers and then obtaining an exorbitant amount of interest, a violation of the Torah.

To Jesus’ listeners at that time, this behavior would have been disgusting! The third servant may have been perceived as the ethical one who did what was customary in the day to preserve in the safest way possible that which had been entrusted to him. And for this chosen course of action, he was punished severely.

So maybe this parable isn’t an illustration of the Kingdom of God. Maybe this parable is “topsy-turvy,” and the third servant is the hero, or as William Herzog describes him, the “whistle-blower,” whose behavior calls attention to the exploitation of the poor and the injustice which overshadows their lives. Maybe it is that the “whistle-blower’s” punishment kicks him out of the rich man’s system and brings him closer to the true Lord, who dwells with the poor and oppressed.” Maybe Jesus told this parable to illustrate what the Kingdom of God is not!

Parables demand a response from the faithful listener. **What are we in our time and place to do with this story? What is a buried truth in this parable that tells us something about the Kingdom of God? How are we to allow the meaning of this parable to change our lives in positive and tangible ways?**

As prelude to an attempt to answer these questions, let’s go back for a minute and listen to the painful words of the third servant as he speaks to his master: *“I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground....”*

What is basic to the source of the servant’s fear? Simply answered, the nature of the relationship between the master and the servant is foundational to his strong feelings of fear.

The servant knows fear because he is vulnerable. He is in a relationship that oppresses him. His experience of vulnerability immobilizes him. He is at the mercy of

that which he has no power to change. He is a servant in bondage without the hope of freedom.

Each of us here today has also known paralyzing fear. For some of us here today that fear kept us for years from living an authentic life. For some of us here today the fear of being exiled from parents, brothers and sisters, and the love of family became a reality. Some of us here today have truly experienced that horror of being “cast out into the outer darkness.”

For others of us, we experience fear without a face in the form of nagging anxieties that attack us intermittently, often in the long, unsettling quiet of the night. We feel the weight of our fears in fatigue and sadness, the source of which we cannot name.

We fear that we are unworthy. We await the harsh judgment that tells us we have not measured up, that we have messed up what we have been given, even our very lives.

We need a sign to tell us otherwise. We need someone to lead us someplace where we can experience another reality. We need community through which we can learn, day by day, what it is to have a relationship with a God who loves us and wishes to nurture us and take away the sting of fear. We need each other in community to help us learn the extent of God’s love for us. We become an expression of God’s love for each other, and most especially, we become an expression of God’s love for those who have not yet found a way to live through their fears, who have not yet experienced the embrace of God’s unconditional love.

We who are moving through our fears can look to those who have gone before us. We can access the witness of the lives of thousands over centuries, women as well as men, who came to choose to live their lives in the Kingdom of God rather than under the rule of unworthy masters who present themselves in so many forms. And like the women and men who followed Jesus and lived waiting for his return, we have community to remind us that we are in a relationship with our God who does not threaten us but who gives to us abundantly.

We know a God who does not hold us in bondage. Through God’s grace we are free if we claim that freedom in the Kingdom of God, on earth now, not only in heaven. What has been given us by our God does not bind us; rather it enables us to live boldly, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We can risk and give of ourselves freely. We can take action to work for justice, in the larger church, in our community, and in whatever domain we find ourselves. And we can do this with the sure knowledge that God’s grace will always trump fear.

Each of us has a particular and unique arena for the living out of the remainder of the days we are given in this life. We are called to share the Good News with those whom we encounter on our journey, to live a life of service, to meet oppression with justice-making, and to live in joy and hope in anticipation of that which is yet to come.

May we who come together here, regardless of where we are in our journey, accept the gift we have given by our gracious master, and then reach out and love and work together to further the Kingdom of God in this time and in this place.

Amen!