

November 16, 2008

The 27th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 27a) - Matthew 25:14-30

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St.J. Hoare, rector

PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Just over a week ago, Dr. Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt reminded us in the Woodall lecture that parables are meant to leave us uncomfortable. She suggested that the meaning of the parable of the talents that we have heard today was something along the lines of 'if you don't use what you have, you will lose it'. This is a pretty traditional reading, and while there is nothing wrong with it, I find myself pretty comfortable with it. What else could be going on? What meaning are we missing?

Could it be that the parable is not about the talents as such, but about the attitudes of the slaves? If so, then the slaves who saw the master as generous and caring, and who experienced the master as someone who was trusting them, raising them up in some way, perhaps calling them to be better than they were, --these slaves took risks, and experienced not only abundance. Because they expected grace and generosity, they took risks and were invited to "enter into the joy of the master". The one who buried his money in the ground expected his master to be harsh: *I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed*, and indeed the master turns out to be harsh and unforgiving. The first edition of *The New English Bible* published in the 70s and intended as a literary translation has the master saying to the slave, "*You lazy rascal*".

This reading challenges us to think about what we really expect of God or who we really think God is. Most of us go through life with what we might call a functional theology that might have nothing much to do with what we think we believe or what we profess with our lips. Most commonly, we say that we think that God is loving and that we will always have enough, but then we act out of a fundamental belief that if we can figure out what is the right thing to do in any given situation and then do it, we will be rewarded. 'Why do bad things happen to good people?' we ask. Then when life deals us a curve ball, and we lose our job, or our marriage falls apart or the stock market goes into a tailspin, or someone attacks one of our children, --in such times we feel hard done by. When we don't feel these things are our fault it is hard to shake the idea that we are somehow being punished. Suddenly it seems only right that we should be bailed out in some way. It's not our fault that some other greedy person did all those things with housing money, so that can't be a reason to allow our car business to fail, can it? If we find ourselves thinking this way then our functional theology is that we should be rewarded when things are going well and that God should fix things when they are not. We are not unlike the person on the street who gets angry if we won't come up with a dollar and tells us that we ought to help people if we are Christians. So in this reading of the parable God is saying what the prophets said to Israel when things were going well and they forgot to care for the widow and the orphan. God is saying in effect, 'you took credit when things were going well, you can take responsibility and deal with the

consequences when they are not.’ “*You wicked and lazy slave...there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” And I, for one, am discomfited. How about you?

That reading really might be it: Expect God to be generous and we live generously. Expect God to be punitive and we live fearfully, not really giving thanks in good times except as a kind of hedge against the possibility of bad times, and we find ourselves feeling as though we are being punished.

But I find myself still not quite satisfied with this reading, because it still leaves the master appearing somewhat capricious and even punitive. The God of our Christian story, the God who is present at Calvary and who brings new and renewed life from the absolute integrity of Jesus is neither capricious nor punitive. So how else might we read this parable? Is it possible that Jesus is describing the reality of the economic system of his day when most of the people hearing this parable would have identified with that third and fearful slave? Could this be a story told for a fearful, oppressed people, --people just trying to get by, just trying to hang on to the precious little they have for life and knowing that what they have can be taken from them at any minute? And is it possible that these same people see the wealthy seeming to get richer all the time? Could Jesus be saying something as realistic and observable and simple as “the rich get richer while the poor get poorer”?¹ And if so, then this parable is a description of the kind of judgment that most of Jesus’ hearers experience here and now with the hope and promise coming in next weeks story of the separation of the sheep and goats. Jesus goes on to tell of the separation of sheep from goats and how it won’t be on the basis of how much money we have made but on the basis of how we cared for the weakest among us. This parable then is like Jesus saying this world will tell you that you are only valuable when you can consume and when you have money. Woe unto you if you lose your job, or if life does you wrong, or if your retirement accounts lose their value. But wait. That is not the message of the Reign of God. In the Kingdom you are of infinite value because you are created by love for love and you will be judged not on how much you consume but on how you treat the weakest among you.

In a few moments we will mark a significant point on the journey to adulthood for a number of our members near their thirteenth birthdays, and this is a good word for them as they begin to respond to the changes that will come in their bodes ready or not: remember that you are loved for who you are and for who you are becoming. Your value

¹ See Sarah Dylan Breuer’s blog here:

http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/11/proper_28_year_.html

“Is the behavior of the master in the parable something that God would commend, let alone imitate? Is this kind of behavior what Jesus expects of God’s people? Heck no! If you’ve got any doubts of that, read what comes immediately after this story: read [the prophesy \(it isn’t a parable\) of the sheep and the goats](#), which tells us that when the Son of Man comes, judgment will not be on the basis of how much money we made, or for that matter on how religious we were or whether we said a “sinner’s prayer,” but rather on whether we saw that the least of our sisters and brothers in the human family, whether in or out of prison, had food, clothing, and health care. We serve Jesus himself to the extent that we do these things, and we neglect Jesus himself to the extent that we don’t.”

does not come from money or how popular you are or how good you are at sports, however good and fun those things can be. Your value comes from the reality that you are loved by God and by your parents and by your friends and you will be judged on how you treat the weakest among you.

So let us sit with our discomfort for a few moments and respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer...