

HOMILY

FOR SUNDAY

NOVEMBER 15, 2020

The lessons assigned for this Sunday are challenging, aren't they? It's no wonder Amma Susan asked me to give the homily. Listen again to parts of each lesson.

From the Book of Zephaniah, chapter 1, verse 12: *At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, "the Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm."*

From the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, chapter 5, verses 1 & 2: *Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters... the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.*

From the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, verses 24 & 25: *Then the one who been given the one talent came forward and said, "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 went and hid the talent you gave me."*

How often have we heard today's Gospel from Matthew! I don't know about you, but I think I've heard it every year for sixty-some years. Like a bad penny, it always seems to turn up around this time of the year - whether it's really in the Lectionary or because the Parable of the Talents gets invoked as a part of a Stewardship campaign.

But then again how rarely we get to hear Zephaniah 1:12! Now Zephaniah was not a bullfrog (like Jeremiah in the Three Dog Night song, “Joy to the World”), but he was a 7th century contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah and himself likewise a prophet. They both prophesized that the Kingdom of Judah faced some very bad times if it didn’t change its evil ways.

What was so evil? It was non-observance of the Torah and hoarding of wealth. Influenced by Zephaniah and Jeremiah, the then King of Judah Josiah became a great reformer who ordered priests to unearth religious taxes hidden away in treasury vaults and spend them on restoring Solomon’s Temple (which is why Josiah gets mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus which opens the Gospel of Matthew.)

Listen again to the verse from Zephaniah I quoted earlier: *I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, “the Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.”* Complacency is evil. Do-nothingness is evil. Lack of belief that God cares what we do is evil. We must act, even when action involves risk – like taking years of savings and spending on the Temple. God holds us to account for inaction.

I’m reminded of what we said together as part of the Confession of Sin a few minutes ago: *Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you, in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.* The undone is equal to the done. We can’t escape sinning by doing nothing. Doing nothing by itself often is sinful. It’s a wasted moment, a wasted opportunity.

We say later in the General Thanksgiving: *Give us such an awareness of your mercies that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips but in our lives, by giving ourselves up to your service and by walking before you.* Awareness and praise of God involve action verbs: Giving, serving, walking.

Ultimately, doing not much of anything won't help us when God comes, as St. Paul tells us in today's Epistle, *like a thief in the night*. Now we assume that a thief takes what's not his. Or to say it another way, takes what we think is ours, what we have worked hard to get, our treasure, our "precious" – as Gollum calls the Ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's story. But is it ours? How much of what we possess is originally and ultimately a function of what we've been given? What do we owe God?

The wicked and lazy slave tells his master in today's parable, our Lord goes reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter seed. It brings to mind Matthew's earlier Parable of the Farmer Scattering Seed (13:3-18). Generous God may be with His gifts but He expects more to be returned than what He put out there. The key point in today's Gospel is that the one-talent slave knew this when he was given the money.

I have to admit for the first sixty or so years that I heard this parable, my heart went out to the slave who was given just the one talent. Why wasn't he gifted with more, like the other two slaves? I bet he was jealous of them. What made this slave so fearful that he hid his talent? OK, he played it safe. Why was it so very bad that he gave back exactly what he had been given in the first place? What's so wrong with that?

I focused for many years on the repayment part of the parable and the notion of what was owed, rather than the giving part of the story and the notion of what was expected. God bestows many gifts on us over the course of our lives, from when we are born as squalling babies to our maturing into savvy adults. Do we really think that He expects us to come to Him unchanged, no different, having done more than the babies we once were?

Now I wonder what kind of damaged ugly, unhappy soul calls his Lord *harsh* and wants nothing to with the big pile of money he's been given. Literally nothing. He pushes it away from himself, leaves it alone. Said another way, the one-talent slave ends up *resting complacently on the dregs*. He buries the talent he's given and walks off, only digging it up when the Lord comes to ask for it. Suddenly, like a thief in the night.

Our Wednesday Morning Bible Study is a wonderful thing; I encourage everyone to join via Zoom. Last time we had a good discussion of today's parable and – full disclosure – it helped me write this homily. A turning point was when Amma Susan asked us to try to put ourselves into the minds of those 1st century folks who first heard Jesus tell the story.

In Jesus's day a talent obviously meant something different than nowadays. For us, it's got a positive, not-too-mercenary meaning. But it was once an actual unit of currency – the Roman *talentum*, to use the Latin. It derived from the weight of a full amphora or giant clay pot. That turns out to be roughly 100-125 pounds, depending on the individual amphora. It also happens the average weight of individuals in Jesus's original audience.

But a pound of what, you may ask? Of gold. A talent was literally worth a human's weight in gold. A single talent equated to 6,000 denarii . Said more easily, a single denarius times 6,000. So what was a denarius, you may ask? A denarius was the average daily wage for a worker in 1st century Palestine. Can do the math in your head?

- One talent equals 16.5 years of working without a day off.
- Two talents equal 33 years of working every day.
- Five talents equal 82 years of work.

Average life expectancy for Jesus's original audience was 30-35 years, depending a bit on income level. The years most laborers could work, from childhood to old age was roughly 16-20. Which means one talent was equal to a lifetime of work. Two talents were two lifetimes. Five talents were five lifetimes.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual income of an individual worker in the U.S. in 2020 is around \$35,000. Here's the math:

- One talent would equate to \$577,500 today.
- Two talents would be \$1,155,000.
- Five talents would equal \$2,887,500.

Hey, the slaves in the parable effectively won the Lottery! It's like the five-talent slave won Powerball, the two-talent slave won Lotto America, and the one-talent slave won Tri-State Megabucks Plus. OK, the amounts are only equal to what they would get from the Lottery after paying income tax and having a 30-year annuity reduced to net present value. Still, good fortune! No?

Oh, right... These three slaves didn't win the Lottery outright. From the get-go, they were going to have to return the money when the master got back from his long trip. Still, it's a truism that it's easier to make money when you start off with money than when you have none to begin with. (Why does that make me think of President Trump?) And, of course, they were slaves. They owned little or nothing. They didn't even own their bodies.

A rhetorical question: How much experience with money would a slave typically have? The master pays for the clothes he or she wears, provides wherever it is she or he sleeps, and serves up whatever it is he or she eats. It all goes with being a slave. If a slave gets to handle money, the money comes from the master. Usually, a slave spends what money he or she is given precisely the way that the master dictates. Which makes a slave being given his weight in gold to do with as he wants – well, wild.

Another thing: Slaves have little to no free will. It's kinda goes with being a slave in the first place. No free will for slaves about how to spend their time. No free will about what work to do. And, oh by the way, no free will about how to get, spend and invest money. Talk about being mentally unprepared for getting ahold of \$577,500 to do something or other with. Still, personally, were I the one-talent slave, my very first thought would be: Use this to buy my freedom! But how?

Which brings us to what I used to find the strangest part of the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel: *You ought to have invested with the bankers!* Is Jesus advertising for Camden National and Kennebec Savings, or their Biblical antecedents in 1st century Palestine? Maybe he'd been dining with tax collectors and

moneylenders too often. No, I hear Jesus saying something else. You could have looked for help. You ought to have sought out folks with financial expertise. With their help, you should have DONE something with the money.

I imagine that one or two Pharisees were among the listeners in Jesus's original audience. At this point, they were likely stroking out. The Torah has literally scores of injunctions against lending money and earning interest (at least with fellow Jews; with non-Jews, it was AOK). The advice given in Jesus's parable was to their mind a sin and no doubt about it. But were I not a Pharisee in the audience, possibly a poorer person or even a slave, I might be thinking: For freedom, I'd do whatever it takes.

You know, some of the stories you hear about modern-day Lottery winners are sad. My reaction often is: I would have handled it better! So what do we think about a Lottery winner who collects a \$577,500 jackpot and buries the money in his backyard? That's the one-talent slave, not just unprepared and ungrateful but possibly scared. He doesn't squander the gift, technically. He simply walks away from it. He went on being the same as he was before. His slave life was unchanged.

Which brings me to stewardship. The Parable of the Talent asks us to think about how we respond to God for all the gifts and good fortune that can and should change our lives. Let's not be one-talent slaves. Let's not act like nothing has been given, do nothing and live by resting complacently on our dregs. The master, Jesus, God demand us to risk doing something different and new. And get ready to tell him how we were made different and new by His gifts.

Are we prepared for that accounting? Are we ready to tell God how our stewardship of His gifts took fullest advantage of them, leveraged them, paid them back with interest? Do we even fully recognize all the gifts that we're given? Do we see our Lord as a *harsh man* of whom we should be afraid or as a generous giver who dares us every day to be different and new?

Do we comprehend how to live our lives according to what the Gospel of St. Luke tells us (12:48): *From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded...*

And where does the St. Andrew's community fit into our accounting? What do we dare do for St. Andrew's? I'm asking a lot of questions. I leave them for you to answer.

Let us dare to invest our gifts so that we may enter into the joy of our Master.

Amen. Alleluia.