

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Matthew 25:14-30

St. Augustine's Church, Croton

November 12, 13, 2005

Robert Ellsberg

This morning's gospel begins on an abrupt note, to say the least.

Simply: "Jesus said, 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them: to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. And then he went away....'"

After some time the master returns and demands an accounting. The first slave announces proudly that he has invested his five talents and achieved an incredible 100% profit. The second one, with two talents, has done the same, earning another whopping 100% return.

In each of these cases the master bestows his seal of approval: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

But then he comes to the third, who has done nothing with the single talent entrusted to him; fearful of his master's harsh reputation, he has simply buried the treasure in the ground, and he now returns it to his master without any added value.

For this he is roundly scolded as a "wicked and lazy slave." In fact, in a final verse that the lectionary kindly spares us, the master orders that he be flung out into the dark, the "place of wailing and grinding of teeth."

No doubt this is a strange and in some ways disturbing parable.

Most of us are familiar with the Sunday School version, according to which each of us has a hidden talent, a gift from God, to be used for God's glory. For instance, some of us have lovely voices and we ought to volunteer to sing in the choir. Others have a talent for baking, and this makes them particularly suited for coffee hour.

There is only one problem with this interpretation. The word **talent** in this parable has nothing to do with our modern understanding. It is not an innate ability. A talent was a unit of money—in fact, the largest unit of all. A talent was a solid bar of silver, weighing nearly sixty pounds and worth 6,000 denarii. Since the typical wage for a day's work was one denarius, it would take a man fifteen years of labor to earn the equivalent of one talent. So one talent—not to speak of two or five—would be an unimaginably huge sum, literally like winning the lottery.

This raises several questions. What kind of master would entrust a million dollars to his slaves?

Why does the master presume his slaves will have any idea what to do with such a sum?

And what kind of investment in this pre-Enron era could possibly yield a 100% profit?

But these are not the only problems.

Is this the same Jesus who elsewhere says that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven?

If the Master is intended as a figure for God, why does Jesus depict him as an avatar of unbridled venture capitalism?

We seem to have wandered into the Gospel of Donald Trump.

In fact, our parable may remind you of an episode of “The Apprentice”: the show where the Donald puts teams of wannabe apprentices through some contrived exercise, like coming up with a 30 second commercial for Lamborghini, or creating a new mascot for Dairy Queen.

Afterward he scrutinizes their performance, either rewarding their initiative or berating them for being losers.

You can almost hear his voice here: “You’re fired!”

I know I would probably be fired by Donald Trump in about five minutes.

And so if there is anyone I can identify with in this story it is the fearful slave who has no idea what to do with a million dollars. Entrusted with such a sum I too would surely bury it all in the ground, or worse—invest it in some shady Nigerian banking scam I discovered on the internet.

But if this story is neither about using our talents nor investing wisely, then what is it about?

We might begin by looking more closely at the abrupt opening words of today’s lesson: “*For it is as if a man....*”

What is the IT here, for which this story is the illustrative analogy—the *as if*?

The lectionary is no help here. The lesson begins, as it were, in mid-thought, with no background or effort to explain the context. In order to understand this lesson we have to turn back the page and see what comes before. There we discover that today’s lesson occurs in a chapter largely concerned with the need to be prepared and ready for the impending day of judgment.

In the previous chapter in Matthew’s gospel, we read how Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem. His disciples ask, “Tell us when will this happen? And what

will be the signal for your coming and the end of the age?”

Jesus replies that no one but the Father knows the exact hour. “Keep awake, then,” he warns. “You do not know on what day your Lord is to come. . . Hold yourselves ready, because the Son of Man will come at the time you least expect him.”

What follows then is a series of analogies, more than parables, that illustrate this principle of being prepared: like a man who stays awake all night to watch out for burglars; or a servant who waits at the ready for his master’s return; or wise bridesmaids who keep their lamps ready for the bridegroom’s arrival.

“Keep awake then; for you never know the day or the hour. . .”

That is the verse that immediately precedes today’s lesson.

And in that context today’s mysterious story begins to come into focus: it is about being prepared for the master’s return, and being ready at all times to render an account.

Today’s other readings reinforce this message. The Old Testament text from Zechariah offers a fearsome warning that the great day of the Lord is at hand—a day that will not be good news for everyone, especially for those who think that gold and silver excuses them from God’s commandments of mercy and justice.

Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians likewise reminds us that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. He warns us, like Jesus, to stay awake, to be ready. . . .

Many early Christians believed, on the basis of such promises in scripture, that the end was truly at hand—if not for the first generation of Jesus’ disciples, then surely very soon.

But as time moved on, this sense of urgency tended to cool, Christians began to adjust to the idea that we might be around for quite awhile.

That extreme anticipation of the end times lives on today, particularly among fundamentalists and readers of Tim LeHaye’s bestselling “Left Behind” series.

Yet as Jesus himself observed, none of us knows God’s plan for history, neither the day nor the hour of his return.

But we do know something about God’s plan for each and every one of us. We know whether it comes in a week, or in 6000 days, or on this very day, that each one of us will face our own personal day of reckoning.

Which raises the question: how will that day find us? How will it find us accountable for the gift of life? To be prepared for that day is not just a matter of completing a living will or putting our affairs in order, but of knowing, before we die, that we have truly lived.

A friend of mine is a college teacher. One time he asked his students to write on the top of their paper how much effort they had put into this work: if 100% effort, then write 100%; if 85 percent, 85; if 60%, then 60; if no effort, then 0 %; whatever. When he got the papers back only two members of the class had written 100% on their papers. The rest ranged from 98 % down to 40%, and judging from the results he felt they had given a fairly honest reckoning. When he returned the papers he announced that while each paper had been read, only the 100 % papers had received any comments or evaluation.

Hold it, someone calls out. I was really honest when I put down 85%--shouldn't that count for something? And he tells them that true joy in life comes from wholehearted exertion. After college, he tells them, when you are job hunting, do you plan to tell your employer that you will be giving 80% effort? Do you ask your sweetheart for a date and say you'll be only 70% faithful, or 40%?

St. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive"--not 98% or 40%.

What prevents us from being fully alive?

Recently, a friend of mine wrote me about an experience some years ago that had changed her life. She had gone to an artist's studio to have her portrait drawn. The artist took his time, asking her a number of questions aimed at drawing her out. Eventually he asked her what she feared most. Her first answer was nuclear war. She mentioned that she had repeatedly had nightmares about nuclear holocaust. But the artist said, "No, I don't believe you. That can't be right. Something more personal." Nancy thought and thought. Finally it dawned on her. "What I fear most is getting to the end of my life and realizing that I had been too fearful -- too careful -- that I never really used my talents." "That's it," the artist said.

There we come back to that word talents. But in Nancy's story this wasn't just a matter of discovering what she was really good at—playing the piano or writing children's stories. It was a matter of discovering the deeper purpose of her life, of discovering what Jesus called "the one thing necessary," the pearl of great price—that treasure for which we are prepared to give everything, to risk it all.

Truly, the moment of accountability is not simply at the end of our lives, that day and hour that is known to God alone. Each day, each hour, confronts us with a choice as to whether we will meet life's tasks and challenges with fullness of heart, or with fear and self-regard.

Last year I lost a dear friend named Daria Donnelly, an editor at Commonweal magazine, who died at the age of 45, three years after she was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. Her illness was discovered just after the birth of her second child, when her bones began to break. Like anyone under such circumstances, Daria felt the terrible injustice of this news. But she proved to be unusually prepared—by faith and discipline—to face her ordeal. She accommodated herself to her circumstances with a calm, unselfish, and

benevolent balance that more than ever became the mark of her personality. She was determined to make each remaining day a witness to life, and to make this her legacy to her children and those she loved. Just weeks before she died she wrote a letter to my younger daughter about her care for a rescued horse: “The only thing that matters is showing love and compassion in the time that is given us. Your love for Leroy has altered the universe.”

Though Daria left few lasting monuments, she was a woman of many talents—as a writer, a scholar, a friend and mother. But her greatest gift was simply her response to life—with her full heart and spirit. She returned 100%. Her love altered the universe.

Why do we come here?

Jesus asked his disciples a similar question, when his hard words were driving many people away. “Where else shall we go?” They replied. “You have the words of eternal life.”

We can take those words and bury them in the ground. Or we can plant them in our hearts where they can grow and bear fruit and glorify their author, the Master of all life, Lord of the living and the dead.

In which case we may live in hope of hearing those words: “Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your master.”