

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

(Nov. 13, 2011)

Using Our Talents

Did you ever wonder where the English word “talent” came from? Interestingly enough it came from the Gospel passage you just heard. The Greek word that means a huge sum of money in the story is “talenton.” And in some translations of Matthew’s Gospel it is simply transliterated as talent. But, as I say, it actually is a monetary denomination, a large one, somewhere in the neighborhood of one thousand dollars. Now that doesn’t sound like that much to us today, perhaps, but in the context of Jesus’ time, that represents a day laborer’s wages for about fifteen years. So, the five thousand silver pieces or talents, given to one servant, the two thousand given to the second, and even the one thousand given to the third, represent an unheard of fortune to Jesus’ listeners.

And that would have made them all sit up and take notice right from the start. Which, of course, is exactly what Jesus wanted.

Well, we’ve heard this parable before, and we feel pretty sure we know what it means. Use the gifts God has given you. Don’t bury them because the Lord will ask for an accounting.

All well and good. But you know, we can always find a deeper meaning in the parables when we delve into them a bit. In Matthew’s Gospel, this parable is one of the cautionary tales that Jesus preaches toward the end of his life. It’s a warning, telling people to be prepared when the master comes and asks for an accounting, much like the story we heard last Sunday about the wise and foolish virgins. Be prepared, the Lord says, for you know not the day nor the hour.

But what might this same parable mean to us today in the context of the greed and the materialism of the market economy that we live in, to say nothing of the financial crisis that has engulfed almost the whole world. After all, Jesus’ words were not spoken only for the people of his own time, but for the people of all times, most especially now for us today.

The literal meaning of the story is simply that there is a right way and a wrong way to be stewards of what God has given us. And the focus in the

parable is basically on the wrong way. The fearful servant who does nothing with what the master has given him is condemned for his lack of initiative. The master obviously wants him to work with what he has given him.

Believe it or not I have actually heard someone try to say that Jesus is giving his blessing to capitalism and a free enterprise economy. Worse than that I once read about a Wall Street broker who used this parable to justify greed. Do you recall a film called *Wall Street*? In it a character played by Michael Douglas makes a speech with words to the following effect: “The point, ladies and gentlemen, is that greed for lack of a better word is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit.”

I can’t imagine Jesus saying “Well done, good and faithful servant,” to that kind of attitude.

In point of fact what Jesus is talking about here is the mission he is giving to his followers and through them to the whole Church. It really has nothing whatsoever to do with economics. It’s an exhortation to live and spread the Gospel, by proclaiming it, by doing the things that Jesus asks us to do.

What has the master given us to work with? He has given us the gift of God’s love, the Word that is the Word of God and the Word that is his sacred body and blood in the Eucharist. He has given us this world we live in. He has given us one another. And he says, “Don’t take these gifts for granted. Don’t hide them or selfishly hoard them to yourself. But use the grace of God to make them grow.”

Pope John XXIII said something that has become almost a commonplace saying: “We are not on earth to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life.” I suspect that such a sentiment was rooted and nourished in a long life of prayer and service. At a moment when many were preoccupied with keeping the deposit of faith secure, Pope John called for a new venture of renewal and dialogue in our life of Christian discipleship and mission.

The Christian life is not a life of complacency. It’s a challenge, and sometimes that challenge means taking a risk, being willing to go out on a limb for the sake of the Kingdom. In many ways, the parable is about

stewardship: how we manage the time, talent, and treasure that God has given us.

This parish has a fine history of generosity in giving not just money but one's self as well in various ways of helping others. With God's help we will continue the good word and do even better than in the past for the greater glory of God.

We all, I am sure, would want to hear the master say to us as the one in the parable said to the industrious servants, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come, share your master's joy. Come, share your master's joy."