

Using our Talents

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Our Gospel lesson this morning continues the theme of *Judgment*, which we began in the Gospel last Sunday, and will continue in the Gospel for next Sunday as well. All three of these last Sundays after Pentecost in Year A have Gospel readings taken from the 25th chapter of Matthew, which is the chapter where Matthew summarizes the point, the reason, for all of Jesus' teaching about the apocalypse and the end of the world. The point is that the End, the Fulfillment, the Judgment of the world and of our lives will come at a time we do not expect, so we must be ready; and the way we must be ready is to be working with God's purposes here and now, so that we can be fulfilled in God's purposes there and then.

That's the picture of Judgment given in this parable of the talents in our Gospel today. And the *good* news of the parable is that two out of three judgments are good ones. We usually think of the word "judgment" in sheerly negative terms: we think of "judgment" as being synonymous with "condemnation" or "punishment." But two of the three slaves in the story today have a positive judgment rendered for them; two of the three hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful slave; enter into the joy of your master." It is that invitation into joy that is the substance of the Judgment; and the Gospel invites us to prepare ourselves for that kind of Judgment, too.

So how does the parable suggest we prepare ourselves to receive a good Judgment from God?

When I was a kid, I had a picture storybook that retold this parable—and also added a few details that were absent from the original Gospel version. In the storybook the first servant was pictured as tall and dressed in a handsome rich robe and with a look of wisdom and intelligence on his face; he took his five bags of money and went and bought a store in the town marketplace, and all that time when the master was gone he sold clothing and farm tools and olive oil to the townspeople, and he built up quite a business and he made quite a lot of money. And when the master came back he said, "Look master: you gave me five bags of gold, and I'm giving you back ten bags of gold." And he was rewarded.

The second servant in the storybook was pictured as not quite so tall, and not quite so handsome, but with a big, round, friendly face. He took his two bags of gold and bought an inn; and all the time the master was away, the second servant took guests into his inn, and cooked meals for hungry travelers; and he built up quite a business and he made quite a lot of money. And when the master came back he said, "Look master: you gave me two bags of gold, and I'm giving you back four bags of gold." And he was rewarded.

The third servant in the storybook was pictured—you guessed it—as not very tall and not very intelligent and not very ambitious. His robe was kind of patched and threadbare. His face was kind of pinched and nervous-looking. He took the one bag of gold the master had given him and went out into the backyard. And in the storybook there was a picture of him digging a very deep hole—the kind of hole every kid wants to dig in the backyard but isn't allowed to—and into that deep hole the servant put the one bag of gold and hid it where it could never be found and where it could never do anything. And you *know* what happened to him when the master came home.

Now what I learned from that picture book as a child was that the way to be prepared for God's judgment was to build up quite a business and make quite a lot of money; what I learned from that storybook was that you had to be *successful* in order to get a good judgment from God. It wasn't until rather later in life that I learned that that storybook interpretation of the parable probably isn't the most helpful way to read it. In fact, I think now that what Jesus meant in this parable doesn't really have anything to do with money or business or success at all. To be sure, the word *talent* in the story does refer to an amount of money: in the Koine Greek of Matthew's time, the *talent* was a unit of weight, and weight was how you measured money. But I think in the parable the money was being used as a symbol for something else; and therefore, largely because of this very parable, the meaning of the word *talent* has changed over the centuries, so that now it doesn't mean "money" at all, but means skill or

ability or capacity—*talent* means the creative gift to bring into existence something that wasn't there before—*talent* means the unique ability to do something out of your very self in a way that no one else can do it.

And so the meaning of the parable, what the metaphor of money is trying to point to, is that God gives us talents—gifts and skills and abilities—and God calls us to use those talents, not just to be successful or profitable, but to be *creative*, to create along with God experiences of beauty and compassion and service and joy and love. The message of this Gospel is that, in infinite wisdom and generosity, God has called us to help God make the universe—and when we give of our talents to increase the sum total of goodness and truth and beauty in the world, when we use our talents to do acts of generosity and kindness and justice and love, then *we give joy to God*, and God says to us, “Well done, good and faithful servants; enter into the joy of your master.”

That's the Judgment depicted in this parable. And that kind of judgment is not a negative condemnation; that kind of judgment is a positive recognition, a positive *celebration*, of all that God creates in us and all that we use our talents to create with God. And *that* is the Judgment for which the Gospel tells us we should be prepared.

And we prepare ourselves for that Judgment precisely by putting our unique talents to use in the unique circumstances of our unique lives.

One person may have a talent for friendship, a real ability to connect with people, to make people feel welcomed and valued and accepted for who and what they really are. Exercising that talent means increasing the amount of companionship and affection and joy there is in the world by co-creating it with God.

Another person might have a talent for speaking the truth, a real ability to cut through appearances or manipulations or double-talk, to get right to the heart of the matter and name the problems that other people might not have the courage or insight or strength to name. I was in a committee meeting once where several of us were sort of talking around the obvious problem and no one wanted to bring it up, until one of us said, “Oh come on now, let's get real: we all know what's going on here”—and she said the difficult thing out loud. It wasn't particularly pleasant to hear what she had to say, but it wasn't until she actually *named* it that the rest of us were free to admit it and deal with it and move on from it. Exercising the talent to speak the truth means increasing the amount of truth and honesty there is in the world by co-creating it with God.

Another person might have a talent for silence, a real ability to be still and allow the unique gift of just this moment to come forth and reveal itself. One time I was having a conversation with some friends, and everybody was talking and making comments and coming back with ripostes—except for one friend who was just sitting there, being silent, listening, taking everything in—until one moment when there was a pause in the conversation, and into the silence our quiet friend said exactly the right thing that brought together everything the group been trying to say and trying to express trying to come together around. His silence was a gift that allowed him to hear us better than we could hear ourselves. Exercising the talent of silence means increasing the amount of attention and understanding there is in the world by co-creating it with God.

All of us have talents like this that have been given to us by God. We may not think of ourselves as particularly gifted or particularly special or particularly talented. But we are all like the slaves in the parable: out of the divine fullness, God has shared with us treasures of creativity, and has called us to use those treasures to create lives of beauty and service and well-being and right relationships and love for God. And it is the mission of the Church, the mission of the Christian community, to help each of us discover our talents, and grow in our talents, and create opportunities to exercise our talents in making beautiful lives for God. That's what we're here for. That's what we celebrate this Eucharist for. That is what we will talk about in our Annual Meeting today. And it's when we do these things, when we rejoice in our talents together, that God gives judgment for us and we hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servants; enter into the joy of your master.” Amen.