

November 13, 2011

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

"Not So Simple Gifts!"

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*Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18*

*Psalm 90:1-8, 12*

*1 Thessalonians 5:1-10*

*Matthew 25:14-30*

Good morning!

I'll bet you're glad I didn't go with some of the text from Zephaniah as my text this morning, particular the part that reads "their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung!"

Let's begin by hearing once more a couple lines from the stewardship prayer we've been using these past two weeks:

Gracious and everlasting God, the giver of all good gifts, you have blessed us and our parish abundantly.  
Grant us hope to dream big dreams and courage to live into our possibilities. *Amen.*

Well . . . here we are again . . . almost the end of another church year. Next week is the last Sunday after Pentecost, and the Sunday after that we start all over again with Advent.

It's been a long slog these past several months. Our weekly servings from the Gospel Matthew, way back during Epiphany and more recently over these past 26 Sundays in Pentecost, have sometimes offered us hope in our afflictions, and at other times have afflicted us anew with the challenge to figure out how to live out our faith in our own lives and in the world. And often in ways we'd just as soon not be reminded of.

So what are we to make of what we've read and heard this morning? [The Rev.] Richard Helmer, rector of an Episcopal church in Mill Valley, California, suggests that all of today's readings share one resounding theme: "Stay awake. Be alert. Be found working with what you have been given."

Helmer notes that for Christians in the early years after the Resurrection, there was a sense of absolute urgency, a sense that Christ's return was imminent, as Paul implied in his letters like this one to the Thessalonians. Helmer then asks: "But what about us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" It's now 20+ centuries later, so we might be tempted to be a little less urgent. [However, I don't think we should dismiss the popular admonition that "Jesus is coming; look busy!"]

With respect to today's Gospel specifically, another Episcopal priest, [The Very Rev.] Anthony Clavier from Indiana, notes that "Jesus was good at providing difficult stories . . . [that were probably] as hard to hear standing in a group in Palestine as they are from our pews today. If we have sympathy for anyone in today's gospel reading, it is probably for the poor person who was deprived of the gift once given, just because he was shy, or reserved, or cautious."

Or perhaps fearful? Because I sense that today's gospel, which we commonly call the parable of the talents, speaks not only to the challenge to make the most of what we are given, but also to recognize what might inhibit us from doing just that. More about this in a minute, but first, it will be helpful to be clear about the term "*talent*" and what it likely signified to those who first heard this story, then what we mean by the word today.

In Jesus' time, a talent was a coin that – when measured by its weight in gold – represented what a laborer of that time would earn over 15 years. Even with the incredibly meager standard of living of the underclass of first century Palestine, this was probably an almost unimaginable amount to the disciples who – as you probably saw – was the principal audience for this parable.

I have no idea what a laborer earns today, but if we take a hypothetical sum of, say, \$20,000 a year, and multiply that times 15, our modern talent would represent \$300,000. And five of these talents would equal \$1.5 million. So to those hearing this parable in Jesus' day, the five talents the man entrusted to the first servant would have been almost incomprehensible, and certainly a sum that would have impressed the listeners with the importance of the property given to that servant.

In modern parlance, because of its value and possibilities, *talent* has typically come to symbolize an individual's abilities and aptitudes. Christians, in fact, often refer to these as God-given abilities. And as such, they are to be understood as gifts, not achievements. Of course, we all recognize that some people are simply more talented than others. Jesus seems to acknowledge this also here. But I think that the underlying questions in this parable are (1) what do we understand we are to do with these gifts, (2) what might keep us from fulfilling the expectations that we are to use these abilities, and (3) what is the price or judgment if we fail either in that understanding and or to the attempt to realize the potential embodied in these talents.

It's common today to think of talent as a "natural" aptitude for art or music or science or literature – some trait of excellence that we like to elevate as a measure of individual achievement. But I suspect that Jesus was probably more concerned in this parable with the kinds of gifts for ministry that Paul talks about in his First Letter to the Corinthians where he notes, ". . . there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Note especially that last phrase, "for the common good." (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

Now please don't think that I 'm implying that artistic or scientific or literary talents are not also God-given. These clearly also have the potential to contribute significantly to the furtherance of the Gospel and the building of the community of the faithful. But I think that in this parable, Jesus is less concerned about those kinds of "natural" abilities than about what each of us does with the kinds of gifts for ministry that Paul addresses, the kinds of gifts that we have been given to work out our baptismal covenant.

I'm not going to quote all of Paul's discourse on the varieties of gifts, but I really don't need to, do I? I mean, the evidence is all around us, right here and right now. We only have to look up to see our musicians and liturgists offering up their gifts for our worship, or glance down the hallway leading to the Parish Hall to see others employing their gifts of teaching and nurture with our children and youth.

And there are also those stalwart souls who show up once a month to cook and serve a hot meal for homeless youth in the U District through the Teen Feed program. Or all of you who responded by donating a half-ton of food over the past few weeks to help re-stock the cupboard of the North Helpline Food Bank. Moreover, in this season of stewardship, just think of the gifts of sincere witness that Monty McGovern, Cindy Martin, Rebecca Dunsmoor-Su and others have shared to help us understand how to respond to the need for our financial gifts to keep heating and lighting this place, and to carry on so many other aspects of ministry both within these walls and beyond.

And finally, if you still need another example, consider what the ECW of St. Stephen's and all the volunteers – male and female, young and not-quite-as-young – have done with the gift that is Cloud 9, and all the individual gifts of their time and love they have committed to its work over the past 53 years.

Well, let's turn briefly to the touchy subject of the cost of not using whatever talents we are given, and the connection with the judgment of the giver. Judgment is often a scary item for Episcopalians. It's not that we don't believe in judgment or fear judgment – we do indeed – but we'd rather not be reminded of it too often.

Clearly there is judgment in this parable, and it actually appears first in the initial allocation of the talents, where the master apportions his property according to what we are told is each slave's ability. Our central figure – for the sake of convenience let's call him One Talent – was already at the bottom of the scale in terms of the master's judgment of his potential, and it looks like One Talent grasped this fact at the outset, just he knew of the master's harshness and his practice of reaping where he had not sown and gathering where he had not planted. In fact, everything here suggests that he already understood why he was being entrusted with only one talent, vs. the two talents or five talents that were allotted to the slaves whom the master apparently appreciated two-to-five times more.

But why didn't One Talent rise above this initial assessment? I think there are at least two reasons: first, of course, is fear, but there is also lack of vision about other possible outcomes. Moreover, he already seems to have anticipated the judgment that was to come. But remember also now, the judgment actually implied in this narrative is the judgment of God on those who fail to exercise and enlarge even the smallest talent or gift bestowed upon them.

Anthony Clavier, whom I mentioned earlier, has some useful insights on this, too. "Jesus is talking about vocation and the grace given when we accept and enter into a covenant with God." Clavier explains that to Christians at that time, baptism was much, much more than simply a rite of the church. In fact, he says, those early Christians often understood that by taking these vows, there were often giving up their lives for God – literally!

Clavier notes that "When we were baptized, we were tasked to be witnesses of the Kingdom which is and which is to come. The word 'witness' in Greek is the same as our word 'martyr' " which Clavier suggests may be somewhat confusing for us today with our typical conception of martyrs as folks who die for the faith and end up with a day in the church calendar or "depicted in a stained-glass window." Clavier continues, "The gift of discipleship given to us in our baptism involves our being prepared to be life-givers for Jesus." I interpret this to mean being active life-givers at a minimum, and actual life-givers if ultimately called to that.

Clavier surmises that the fault of the fellow I'm calling One Talent was that he was entirely passive, and so frightened by the prospect of losing even the little he had been given that he was paralyzed with fear, and unable to envision any other possibilities. He adds: "The warning that the gift may be taken back flies against our popular notion of God. Surely God wouldn't be so mean! But the warning comes from Jesus, so it is worth taking seriously."

So we add discipleship to our list of gifts and talents. But what's the possible cost for failing to make the most of this gift? Am I personally concerned about failing in that, and the judgment that might befall me? You bet I am, although there's little in my daily life or demeanor that would give much of a clue about that – at least in the way we usually envision someone living in fear of the judgment. But it's there. Oh yes!

Of course, an appreciation of the potential judgment we may face for not using the gifts we've been given can actually be useful, so long as our preoccupation with that judgment doesn't paralyze us and keep us from taking positive action in response to our fear.

So let's explore the problem of fear just a little. I like to think I know something about the kind of gifts or talents Paul and Jesus were getting at. I believe I'm been particularly blessed in this. And for the moment, I probably know as much as I'm going to about the topic of judgment. (I assume I will learn more about that at some point down the road!)

But I think I'm something of an expert on fear. Of course, I appreciate what Dave Barry has to say on the subject: "All of us are born with a set of instinctive fears – of falling, of the dark, of lobsters, of falling on lobsters in the dark, or speaking before a Rotary Club, and

of the words "Some Assembly Required." But to my mind, one of the best characterizations of fear comes from Frank Herbert's monumental science fiction classic, *Dune*. I suspect many of you have read it or perhaps seen the film version.

Early in the story, the 20-something heir to the house of Atreides, Paul, is subjected to an intentionally terrifying physical and psychological test, one that can actually kill him. Part of the litany we hear in Paul's mind during the test is: "Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me."

Consider yourself lucky that I'm not going to tick off a litany of my fears here and now. But in light of this Veterans' Day weekend, and because many of you will recognize the situation and know the participants, let me quickly share one such situation where someone else's gifts helped me deal with one of my greatest terrors.

In the six-to-nine month run-up to our son Mike's deployment to Iraq in mid-2003, I was becoming increasingly paralyzed by my fear for his safety, and frankly, for my fear of our loss should anything happen to him. The level of paralysis and dysfunction did not make logical sense, but it was as real as real could be. I'm a lousy poker player because I'm terrible at disguising what's going on inside me, so my preoccupation with this frightening situation was pretty obvious to a lot of folks.

One of the people gracing our lives here at that time was a ministry intern, Patty Baker, now the vicar of St. Clare's at Snoqualmie. Patty and I continue to work together on a number of things connected with diocesan disaster preparation and recovery, and she's become a good and valued friend.

But in the late summer of 2003, it didn't take a genius to spot the distress I was showing, and Patty asked me about it point blank. I shared that I was so fearful about Mike's impending deployment that I didn't know if I could physically withstand the ordeal, that it sometimes felt as if I might actually break apart. Patty's response, which I have never forgotten, and which I have come in succeeding years to offer to others in similar situations, was: "Well, maybe you'll just have to let the rest of us hold some of your fear for you!"

To this day I think it was probably this crazy gift of the spirit from Patty, of being able to hand over a small portion of my fear to someone else, that allowed me to emotionally – and physically – survive Mike's year in Iraq. (Incidentally, for those of you who remember that time, it's hard to realize now that he returned from that deployment seven years ago last week! Thanks be to God indeed!)

So that's one of my own experiences of "fear as the little death," the same kind of mind killer that paralyzed our friend, One Talent, and kept him from seeing his true calling and the possibilities that lay ahead for him with his master (or, in the larger context intended in this parable, for the gift entrusted to him by God on behalf of his community.)

What's the antidote? Jesus, the author of this parable, gave us the answer in so many instances throughout his ministry, an abiding message we hear time and again, in a variety of different ways: "Be not afraid." Say it with me: "Be not afraid." He is always there with us, in all of our trials, is always available, will not abandon us. He virtually begs us to trust him and his love, and to fall back on him whenever we feel the need.

I believe that Jesus does not expect us not to fear, but to reach to Him for help in working through it, in much the same way that author James Neil Hollingsworth puts it: "Courage is not the absence of fear, but the judgment that something is more important than fear."

So it is when we can recognize that the use of our talents is more important than our fear that we are able to take courage in the love of God, and in the strength and support of those around us, to ultimately help us offer up all of what we hold in trust for the growth of our own community of faith.

Let me finish with some of my favorite words from one of my favorite poets, W.H. Auden. Some of you have heard this before:

"We would rather be ruined than change. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die."

In life, and in this season when we're asked to expand our giving further than we can envision, let us not die in our dread of change. Rather, let us climb the cross of this particular moment, to dispel our old illusions about our stewardship, and see a new understanding of what we are entrusted with and what we can do with it, in the same assurance as we responded last week in reaffirming our baptismal covenant, ". . . with God's help!"

Some of you knew I was going to ask for this: Can I have an Amen?