

Use It Or Lose It

Matthew 25:14-30

November 16, 2008

I.

Today we heard about three slaves who were trustworthy enough to hold their master's money. But when the master asked for the money back, there was good news and bad news. This reading is a continuation of last week's story about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Last week we heard that good works are an integral part of the faith that enables us to live in eternity with our Lord. This week we examine how we do those good works, and the purposes for which they should be intended. Next week we will hear about an example to guide us as we live as Christians in the world.

All three readings are part of a series of parables Jesus told about the kingdom of heaven. But they also are parables about final judgment, and so of necessity they not only speak of eternal life but also of eternal separation from God.

I suppose that thinking of final judgment should not remind me of a story, but it does anyway. It seems that a very wealthy fellow was struggling through his final illness, and he called his wife into his bedroom. He told her to get all of his money together, put it in a big sack, and place it in the attic. He explained that when his spirit was caught up to heaven, he could just grab the sack and be on his way. She did what he asked, and after he died she went up to the attic and found the sack was still there. She said to herself, "I knew I should have put that sack in the basement."

Today's gospel, however, is not something to laugh about. You probably noticed that all three of our readings are about the day of the Lord, and the things that will happen when the Lord returns to establish God's kingdom. It's something to be taken seriously.

And in first century Palestine most Christians took the promise of Christ's return quite seriously. They thought it would happen very soon, and its likelihood was at the front of their consciousness. It defined their faith.

That doesn't seem to be the case today. We still await Christ's coming in glory, but many people who are believers tend to push that glorious time to the back of their consciousness. Their faith is focused elsewhere. They don't think much about how some of the things they do now can affect their existence in eternity.

That's exactly what Satan wants. He wants us to think only of the here and now, not the hereafter. We can just hear him now, can't we? "Oh, don't worry about all those myths and tall tales. Nothing has happened for centuries. Go ahead and do whatever you want. You'll be OK." But if we listen to those lies we run the risk of dismissing what will be the most important event in history. And we run the risk of being on the outside looking in.

II.

Today's gospel exposes those lies for what they are. It gives us God's truth. But first, we have to understand its meaning. And sometimes the readings we hear are straightforward. Sometimes Jesus clearly spoke basic truths, such as the commandments to love God and our neighbors. Understanding them can be easy. To use a modern cliché, it might be so easy a caveman could do it.

Other readings, however, are more difficult, like our reading for today. Sometimes when Jesus speaks to us across the centuries from a different culture and society, he uses examples that people in that time and place would understand, but that are strange to us now. And sometimes he uses stylistic forms, such as parables, that were common then but since have fallen into disuse. We are left to translate his words into a contemporary context.

III.

The story we heard today is an example of that. It began with a wealthy man who left a great deal of money in the care of three of his slaves. This money was denominated in so-called "talents," and just one talent easily was worth more than a year's wages. He left five talents with one of the slaves, two talents with a second, and one talent with the third. And then the master went on a long journey and was gone a long time.

But eventually he returned and called his slaves to account for the money he had entrusted to them. Two of the slaves pleased the master because they had doubled his money and the master rewarded them. Don't we wish we had financial advisers like that?

But the third slave incurred his master's wrath, not because he lost the money and had nothing to give back, but because he merely preserved it. He buried the one talent in the ground rather than even investing it to draw interest. And when he returned it, his master gave it to the slave who had converted five talents into ten, the one who had the most.

At this point the story changes from a parable about a master and his slaves, and becomes a prophetic teaching. And here we see the significance of the story.

The master proclaimed that, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." And then the master said "As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

A little research would show that Jesus was putting his own words into the master's mouth. The part about more being given to those who have much was a direct quote from Jesus' teaching to his disciples a few days earlier (Mt. 13:12). And references to the outer darkness and weeping and gnashing were used by Jesus on three different occasions in Matthew (8:12, 22:13, 25:30).

These words don't have to be interpreted like the rest of the parable. Jesus was giving his listeners an obvious clue that he was speaking about his second coming at the end of history, and the final judgment of all people that would occur as the kingdom of heaven comes to completion. He shifted the story from parable to prophecy.

IV.

This helps us to understand the parable in a contemporary context. We can begin by focusing on Jesus' words as he imparted them to the master when he said, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

What about this? Today a statement like this might seem a little unfair, wouldn't it? Aren't we taught to share what we have with those less fortunate? And to give more to those who already have much at the expense of those who have nothing sounds like some of the charges we heard during a recent political campaign. It certainly does not seem like biblical teaching.

But we should not rely upon a worldly understanding of those words. Jesus wanted his listeners to hear them in a different way. He was not talking about how material things, such as money, can be enjoyed in abundance. Rather, he was explaining how our spiritual gifts and temporal gifts can multiply as we use them for God's purposes. And in today's world the monetary talents of the parable are understood to mean the skills and talents we have received from God.

As background, Scripture tells us that we are given a variety of gifts. Through God's saving grace we can receive spiritual gifts of faith, encouragement, discernment, leadership, hospitality, teaching, mercy, and many others. (see Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, Eph. 4, and 1 Pe 4).

And there are other types of gifts. Through God's common grace we can be given temporal gifts of intelligence, athletic ability, literary skill, artistic ability, business acumen, musical talent, and many others.

As Christians we are called to use all of our abilities and skills for his purposes first. When we use what we have in that way then more will be given and, in the words of the reading, we will have an abundance. And God also wants us to use our gifts to come to genuine repentance and true faith, to help unify Christians in a common community, and to expand the church. These gifts, when we use them as they are intended, can strengthen our faith and lead to salvation and eternal life.

So we see that the reference to money as a talent in the gospel is prophetic. Just as the slave was punished for not using his monetary talent to make more money, we would not be doing God's will if we bury our talents and do not use them for good.

And using our gifts wisely does not just produce an abundance for ourselves, but also for others. Earlier in Matthew's gospel Jesus spoke symbolically of letting our talents shine into the world.

In two frequently-quoted verses he said, "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (5:15-16).

When we do that our gifts will multiply and be received among others, who in turn can spread them even further. This is part of what Jesus meant when he said that those who have much will be given more. By following the example of the two good slaves and wisely investing our talents, so to speak, we can carry our gifts into the community and watch them grow for others as well as for ourselves.

So, all of this means we are called to do what the two good slaves did. We are expected to use the gifts that God has given us, whatever they might be, and to do so for the benefit of others. In the process we will be living into our obligation to love God and our neighbor as set forth in the Great Commandment. And in the process we will have more as we receive God's blessings.

And we must always remember the ever-present reality that, like all three slaves in today's reading, we eventually will be called to account for our stewardship of the gifts we have been given. If we have used them well, we and others will be spiritually richer. If we have neglected or squandered them we will become spiritually impoverished, and lose even what we have.

V.

To some extent today's gospel tells us to use it or lose it. We have heard this cliché describe brain functions, and consequences of the lack of physical activity. But it also applies to spiritual activity and what we do with the gifts that God has given us. Our gifts and talents are not just for our own well-being. We have them also to benefit others around us.

We always should remember that God's kingdom began with Jesus' birth, and it will be fully here when he comes again. But for now it is a work in progress, and it is our responsibility to make things better, and to improve the state of affairs in between the beginning and the end. And if we do, then our gifts and talents will multiply themselves as others receive and share in them. Like the two good slaves who doubled their talents and were richly rewarded, we can do the same if we but make the same effort with our own talents. *Amen.*