

27th Week after Pentecost – Year A – Proper 28 - November 16, 2008
Judges 4:1-7, Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30
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PBS Kids Go! has a website called *It's My Life*, dealing with all kinds of questions and answers on life issues aimed at tweens and teenagers. One of the questions posed by Kristen is "If you had a million dollars how would you spend it". The responses came in by the boatload and fall into three categories: the consumerists, the pragmatists, and the idealists. While we consider our own response, here is a selection of the answers on *It's My Life*, to get us all thinking about what the future might hold. Ten year-old Praneeth says, "If I had a million dollars, I would buy a mansion, Ferrari and Lamborghini." In response, twelve year-old Rachel has this advice, "Let's be realistic. Unless you donate to charity, you're gonna pay half that money in taxes. I'd give half of the money to charity and use the rest of the money to pay for college." Victoria, with ten years of life experience tells us, "First college, then charity, then family, then me, then more ME!" With a wistful air, eleven year-old Kristin notes, "I would probably waste it." Then there is twelve year-old Sean, "If I had a million dollars I would give it all to the cancer society."

Just like this group of children, today's Gospel parable from Matthew has multiple layers of response and interpretation. Traditionally this parable has been allegorized to submission into a lesson on the importance of using all the talents, meaning spiritual gifts, God has blessed us with or else. This interpretation is so deeply imprinted that it is hard not to read and hear this parable without thinking "talent" translates directly as "spiritual gift". It also carries with it a clearly Western cultural mindset, which some of us name as the Protestant work ethic or the American dream. In other words, work hard and you will achieve success. This traditional interpretation has a couple of unwanted parasites that cling on for the ride. Two proverbial messages: "the rich get rich, and the poor get poorer," is one, and the other is, "use it or lose it".

The first is expressly endorsed by our culture. Honestly, how many of us equate material wealth directly with our definition of success? On the other hand, Jesus worked hard to promote the values of justice and equality, especially for those who have more than enough to share with the poor and needy. As for the second message, at first glance, Scripture seems to support the "use it or lose it" mandate. We have a classic example in this parable if we read it literally: "For to 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." Literally speaking it also implies that God's gifts are revocable, which makes me, and I hope you, cringe. It just doesn't jive. Imagine this, God speaking, "Hi, here's this wonderful gift just for you from Me. But if I find out you haven't used it fully or properly, I'm going to take it away. What's more I'm then going to throw you into eternal darkness, so you can chew on that for a long time." For God, who loves us so much that He gave His life for us, there is something mighty strange about this contractual footnote. On close inspection, the traditional interpretation neatly glosses over a rather hostile picture of God, and leaves us feeling rather uneasy.

Here's another possibility for helping us to consider today's parable. It is again a story of the abuse of God's gifts, but specifically told against the Judean leaders. It fits into the broader pattern of the Matthean community's response to strong opposition from said leaders. This parable also links to Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees and Scribes in Matthew 23 which says, "they do not practice what they teach" (Matthew 23:4); and "woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 23:13). Jesus condemns his community leaders for abandoning God's teaching on caring for widows, orphans, and the poor. Nine year-old Ariel's voice would be crushed if she shared how she would spend her million dollars, "I would give it the orphans". Rather, the leaders of the Temple trade God's material gifts to gain favor with the Roman authorities, and to make one another wealthier. On the spiritual side, they teach a harsh rule of life that seems to reflect a harsh God like the

ruler of the parable. He is one that demands service, and treats His servants brutally if they don't comply or measure up to a long list of human-made rules. Even worse, like the third servant in the parable, they bury the true riches of God's Word and teaching by disdainful gentiles who seek God, and their own who seek a deeper knowledge of God. The Temple leaders effectively abdicate their role as teachers of God's chosen people. They also lock people out of the kingdom because they refuse to fulfill their mission as God's Light bearers to the world. It is a form of idolatry to resist God's love in favor of self and greedy ambition. Contextually, the Judean leaders of Jesus' day had become true servants of a worldly master, even exacting interest on loans, which is forbidden under the Law. The context is very real for first century Palestinians, but perhaps less easy for you and I to translate into our own lives.

One more possibility for this parable is that we have another story that teaches us about the way of the world's fiefdoms versus God's kingdom here on earth, and in heaven. Money, trading, interest, banking are all systems of commerce that are meaningless in God's heavenly kingdom, so we know this parable is talking about the world. As a comparative parable, it has a much deeper contextual link. In that respect, it wasn't unusual in the first century to have rich landowners or those who claimed royal title, like the real Archelaus, son of Herod the Great. Stewards were used to manage their vast land holdings. On return, the rich landowners demand an accounting from their slaves, and mete out rewards and punishments accordingly. The sums of money in this parable are huge amounts. One talent represents about 15 year's wages. Young steward Stephen who might have been the one given the five or ten talents, tells us what he would do with his million dollars, "I would put it in a tax sheltered annuity to make more money." Obviously before the market tanked! Then there is the poor slave who is only given one talent, just like twelve year-old Kalina who says, "This might sound weird, but I would be scared to spend it!!!!" Kalina would pay a heavy price for refusing to participate in the landowner's idea of successful money management.

Yet this parable has a marvelous ironic ring to it. It's the equivalent of Bill Gates stealing the intellectual property of a couple of bright teenagers who have just developed an ingenious new product that will effectively put Apple out of business. And then adding insult to injury, by coercing the young inventors to work for Microsoft at less than minimum wage. It's culturally endorsed theft: stealing from the poor to make the rich richer. It is the opposite of God's kingdom community, where no one has more than they need, but most importantly, no one has less than they need. Does this parable prompt you and me to pick up a mirror and take a long hard look at the reflection of wealth? What about challenging our country's leadership and their use of money? Is it time we prayerfully reflected on the stewardship of our community's resources? What is our part in ending extreme poverty and hunger? How is God asking us to bring more of His Light into darkness, fear, and chaos? Perhaps like ten-year Javier, we would say, "If I had 1 mill., I would give to the whole world some money." Or Brandie, who says, "I would help others in need." Perhaps it is easy to say I'll give when I have a million dollars. What do we say if we have a hundred thousand, ten thousand, one thousand, one hundred, or just ten dollars?

"For to those who have, more will be given... from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Would it change our relationship to money if we read it in this way? For to those who have a love for God, they have found the source of abundant wealth, because the steadfast love of God never ceases. For those who have no love of God, the spark of God's image within is stifled by self-centered greed. They have a false sense of security tethered to a temporal idol, instead of true freedom grounded in God's eternal love. If they had a million dollars, they might respond like nine year-old Ari, who boldly says, "I would take over the world!" Then the gentle voice of Jesus replies, "What will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?" (Matthew 16:26).

Amen.