

Pentecost 22 A 2011  
Proper 28  
Texts: Judges 4:1-7  
    Psalm 123  
    1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
    Matthew 25: 14-30

“Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Matthew 25: 21

**Michelle, my administrative assistant, can tell you that all week I have been out of sorts. I’ve been in my office whining about this week’s readings. Now, this may come as a surprise, but there are weeks when pastors and priests read the appointed texts for the following Sunday and think to themselves, “Ah, Jeeze! I don’t like any of these readings!”**

**If we didn’t belong to a lectionary-based denomination, I could easily look through the scriptures and decide to preach on anything my little heart desired. And that is the problem. What my heart desires, and what God requires of me, are not necessarily the same thing.**

**In our collect for the day we pray, “Blessed Lord, who caused *all* holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.”**

***All* Holy Scriptures are written for our learning-not just the parts that we like, agree with, or can identify with; not just the parts that make us feel good or that we understand.**

**I give thanks that we belong to a lectionary-based denomination. I give thanks because usually the readings we have the most trouble with are the ones we most need to hear. We most certainly need to hear about love, forgiveness and eternal life, but we also need to hear about fear, death, and judgment.**

**I have said before that the readings we find the hardest to deal with are the ones that God invites us to really wrestle with, to come to a new and possibly different understanding of-not so that it becomes more**

**palatable or to our liking, but because we become better followers of Jesus when we do so.**

**What happens when we take God up on the offer to wrestle with Scripture? The collect for today tells us that when we do that we are better able to embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life in the life of Jesus Christ. That is a pretty wonderful return on the investment of our time and energy, if you ask me.**

**We can choose not to wrestle with those parts of scripture, but then we would be taking the easy way out-in other words, we then become like the third slave in this morning's gospel reading...but I am getting ahead of myself.**

**When this parable is told, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is in the last week of his life. He knows what is about to happen and he is trying to prepare his disciples for life without him. He has shared with them everything the Father has given him; his work on earth is almost complete.**

**“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.”**

**Part of the problem in this part of the scripture reading is that the word “talents” has gotten all wound up with our Western understanding of the word talents. When we speak of talents we refer to abilities, or aptitudes. And it doesn't help that this reading occurs during most churches stewardship campaigns that talk of time, talents and treasures, thereby further cementing the connection.**

**This story told by Jesus is not a stewardship sermon to the disciples. It is a story of preparation for the time when Jesus is physically gone from them and they have to carry on, on their own. It is a story about how they are to wait for his return.**

**A talent, as understood in Jesus' time, was an amazing amount of money. One talent was equivalent to 20 years worth of wages, two**

**talents to 40 years of wages, and 5 talents was worth an amazing 100 years of wages.**

**This master gave his slaves a mind-boggling gift. The first slave doubles the value of the gift, as does the second slave. When the master comes back they show the master how they have shared what he gave them and the amazing results of their efforts.**

**To both slaves the master says, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”**

**The third slave, fearing his master, buries the talent and when his master returns, the slave returns his master’s gift to him. This is not a bad slave. In fact, he was acting in accordance with rabbinic teaching. He was acting prudently. Burying money was considered the best way to guard against theft and once the money was buried the person responsible for the money was free from any liability.**

**So when the master returns the slave with the one talent returns the talent to him and says, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed.”**

**A harsh man? Really? Think about the slave’s statement for a minute. The master gave the slave a gift of 20 years wages. This perception of the master doesn’t make much sense. Would a harsh master be given to such generosity? I don’t think so.**

**“So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.”**

**The slave returns the gift-from the moment he was given it he wanted to be free of the responsibility of it and he wanted to blame the master for his own passivity and why nothing was done with it. The slave never claimed the amazing gift he has been given.**

**It is unfortunate that this story has been referred to as the parable of the talents, because it really isn’t about the talents at all. This parable is**

**about the relationship between the slave and the master and how fear led the slave to reject the generosity of the master.**

**The slave could not enter into the joy of the master because the relationship was based on fear, and joy and fear cannot exist in one person at the same time.**

**The slave could not enter into the joy of the master because he could not recognize what he had been given in the first place. The slave approached the relationship with his master from a place of fear and trembling, not from a place of faith and trust.**

**There is an old saying that perception is reality. For this slave, because he saw his master's generosity as stinginess and expectations as unreasonable he did nothing. Failure is not the problem here. Trying and failing is not what got this slave into hot water. Doing nothing is what condemned him.**

**What is our perception of our master? Do we come to the relationship out of fear or out of thanksgiving for the immense gift given to all of us in Jesus?**

**Are we so afraid of failing at our efforts of doing something that doing nothing remains the most attractive alternative?**

**One economist wrote about this parable as a way of illustrating high stake gambles in venture capitalism and return on investment, also known as ROI.**

**Well, it is not about economics and high stakes gambles or capitalism in any way, shape or form, but the argument can be made that it is about return on investment.**

**This parable begs us to ask ourselves, what our return to God is in his investment in us through Jesus Christ. What might that return look like?**

**God's return on investment is really our return on the incarnation. Our ROI is just that, a return on the incarnation.**

**God took the original high stakes gamble by coming to earth and showing his love for us, and God took that gamble all the way to the cross.**

**The community St. Matthew was writing to was being asked to live their lives in faith and not fear. This parable asks us to do the same.**

**The community St. Matthew was writing to was being asked to share the gift of the gospel until the time when Jesus returned to them. We are being asked to do the same.**

**Those early disciples were given a lavish gift, a gift that was more generous than anything that had ever been given to them. That gift was also given to us.**

**God does have expectations of us, great expectations, but also God gives us everything we need to fulfill them.**

**We do not need to fear God, but we do need to do his work. In that work, in feeding God's people, body, mind and soul, we will enter into the joy already waiting for us, and in that joy is nothing less than the blessed hope of everlasting life.**

**Amen.**