

## Proper 28, Pentecost XXVII November 16, 2008

As Advent hurls toward us, (it's only two weeks away) the readings always talk more and more about judgment and the last things. Today's readings are chocked full of this, and reach their climax with that poor servant with one talent and a high level of anxiety.

Now, all of this judgment stuff can be so intimidating, or so irritating, that we don't pay careful attention to it. After all, it can start to sound like God is against us—that he is really after us, and that the best we can hope for is to squeeze by with lots of hard work and a little luck. That old image of 'sinners in the hand of an angry God'—where we are repulsive insects held by a thin thread over the fires of hell—is a familiar one. It's sometimes tempting to buy into that, but doing that is always bad religion.

Instead, look again at the beginning of Matthew's parable. The whole thing begins when the master gives each of the slaves a real treasure—anywhere from one to five talents. Now, the parable isn't only or mainly about money—but a talent was a measure of money, and it was a huge sum. Most commentators say that a talent was around sixteen years' wages. When you get to those kinds of numbers, the exact amounts don't matter all that much. The guy with one talent wasn't short changed; he was wealthy beyond the imagining of anyone who might have heard Jesus tell this story.

So, the point really isn't that some got a lot and others got a little. The point is that this story, like all stories of God's judgment, begins with a gift, with a great and a generous and a very important gift. That's how it always begins. And judgment is about what it looks like to reject, to despise, the gifts of God, and to choose other things, lesser things, instead.

While this parable was probably told originally against the scribes and Pharisees, and the way they handled the gift of the law; it's also about us, about our lives—the whole of our lives. It begins with the simple reality that who we are, and what is possible for us, is pure gift. God just gives us to ourselves. God does that. God loves us; and whenever God loves, God gives. And God gives us many, many things—and central to that is the gift of ourselves—of who we are and of who we can be.

In the parable, different people are given different amounts. Now, I'm not real sure what it means, from God's point of view, to say some of us are given more than others—one or two or five or whatever.

Sure, I know what it means from *my* point of view for some to be given more than someone else, (some people are tall) but I don't know that from God's point of view. I suspect the point here is that every gift of self that God gives is unique. We are all different; and we can't point to someone else as a measure for ourselves. In any event, what comes first is God's goodness, God's generosity, God's abundant giving. Indeed, the judgment part wouldn't make any sense apart from that generosity.

Now, in the Bible, gifts always include, they always carry with them, some form of vocation. Vocation is God's call to us, God's word or direction for a purpose or end that God opens up for us. Vocation isn't separate from God's gifts—it's not a price we pay for them. Instead, vocation is an essential part of every gift we receive. They come together, as a set.

We see one way of working this out in the first lesson. From its beginning, Israel had been given the gift of being God's special people.

This included a multitude of things—from the land itself, to victory over its enemies, to the moral precepts of the law of Moses. All of that was gift.

Part of that gift was the vocation to live in such a way that the character of God could be seen by anyone who looked at Israel. The book of Judges, for all sorts of reasons, interprets failure in battle to be what happens when Israel ignores this vocation, and so despises the gifts of God. Israel chose to live in ways that were just like the ways everybody else lived, ways that did not reveal who God was either to Israel or to her neighbors. Israel pretty much buried her gifts in the ground; and that's the sort of thing that brings judgment. Judgement isn't about breaking rules; it's about abandoning a vocation, a call from God to use and proclaim God's gifts.

Remember, the story of Israel, like the story of the Christian community, doesn't begin with God looking for reasons to destroy his people; it begins with God's great generosity. Judgment only happens as the gift is despised.

Back to the parable: The gift of self—the gift to us of who we are—carries with it (among other things) not only the vocation to use those gifts to God's glory, but also the vocation to Christian character—the call intentionally to shape our lives—our regular and habitual ways of behaving—around the image of humanity we receive from Jesus.

This vocation involves taking who we are and, by constant, active, and disciplined choices, becoming more and more a person whose life reveals the mind and heart of Christ. It includes the daily business of making choices that increase in us the virtues of the Christian life—virtues such as faith, hope, love, justice, temperance, and more. The vocation to Christian character means taking the gift of who we are and growing that gift, and deepening that gift, so that by the end we have indeed increased what the Master gave us, and so can offer back to him something greater than we received.

Again, judgment is about despising the gift of who we are—about ignoring our vocations to develop what we are given and to build Christian character. The poor schmuck with the one talent really ignored what he had. He left it alone, he was anxious and he refused to move past his own anxieties. The result is no change, no growth, and finally, no more gift. You use it or you lose it. That's just the way it is.

And be sure to notice here that the problem wasn't that he tried and failed—that he set out to build on what he was given and somehow got it wrong. He didn't get the wrong answers, or make lousy investments. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that he took who he was and hid it, and did nothing with it, and so refused to embrace either the Master's generosity or the possibilities of his own nature. That's the tragedy that leads to judgment.

But most of the parable is not about tragedy. Those servants who embraced their gift, (and this was most of them), the ones who struggled to nourish and deepen what they had been given, who made something of themselves—these servants had a great surprise. They had thought the whole business was over when the time came for an accounting. 'Here is your stuff back, my part is over.' they said.

But they were wrong. What they were about had barely begun. Their first huge gift, the overwhelming amount they had been given—this was barely a beginning. The master dismissed those talents as just 'a few things'. More was to follow; much more.

The joy of the Master is not in destruction. The joy of the Master is in giving still more—more than we can ask, more than we can hope for, more than we can imagine. That is what the Master longs to do. Our vocation is to accept his gifts, to build upon them, and to be ready to be surprised.