

Year A – Proper 28 “Spiritual Stewardship”

“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance” (Jesus in Mt 25:29)

How many of you think of yourself as rich? as having a lot? as having enough? Perhaps you think of yourself as just barely hanging on. Those kind of questions have loomed large as the economic stress of this country, and indeed of the world, has seeped into our daily lives and surrounding community.

Jesus talks about money many times in the gospels, using its hold on us to illustrate how it gets in the way of the kingdom and the fulfillment of the life of God in our midst. We all want money and we never have enough of it, no matter how much we have. I have sensed for some time that our common economic life which is often built on credit is fragile. And the past months have reinforced that. It’s enough to make you want to take whatever you have and put it under a mattress. Kind of like that man in today’s parable who buries his talent in the ground. Into all of this comes Jesus, with his unique perspective on what it is to be a steward. We meet him on the Mount of Olives and the darkness and foreboding is gathering among the disciples. He has entered into Jerusalem on a donkey, challenging/mockingly the Emperor of Rome in doing so. He has overturned the tables in the courtyard of the temple, overtly displaying his disapproval of the economic advantage that is being played out in a house of prayer. Jesus is not only teaching in a radically way, he’s getting down right dangerous and Pilate and his minions as well as the temple authorities are noticing. How is this all going to end? The Disciples know that Jesus is about fulfillment of God’s creation and perhaps the time is near and they are asking lots of questions. In the 25th chapter of Matthew we are pulled into the inner circle. These are words of what the fulfillment of God’s life in this temporal zone looks like. This parable of the talents, as it is called, is about our life, our choices, our own fulfillment as human beings.

The parable of the talents is often interpreted as a story about how we are to use our talents (our gifts, our abilities), and that is certainly one possibility. But like all of Jesus’ teachings it has many layers.

On the surface, it is about money and lots of it. In Greek a talent is a measure of a valuable commodity in pounds. One talent varied from 60-80 + pounds. In today’s terms, 80 pounds of gold, for instance, would be worth about \$500,000. One talent, 80 pounds, a half million. Just picture it here. I couldn’t carry it. We’d need a wheelbarrow for five talents.

At the next level, it can be seen to be about our talents or gifts – those abilities that we each have that are different and unique, special and valued, valued highly. Those abilities are what we are to use in our lives in some way.

But digging deeper, I’d like to suggest that this is a parable about not simply money or the abilities that each of us has. It’s about the essential gift given to each of us that is the same, though some may seem to have more than others. It’s the gift of God’s image, God’s self, Christ’s very being, the Spirit of God. It is this that dwells in us, waiting to be made manifest on

this earth, in this place, at this time. And each of the other meanings rests of top of this basic essential of what Jesus is all about. They are related.

How we use our gifts and talents either fosters the spiritual life of God in us and those around us or it does not. How we live our economic life, what we do with our money does the same.

The parable gives us some basic principles. These are the principles of spiritual stewardship:

1. Nothing really belongs to us. We are stewards, that is, those who are entrusted by the Divine Life to manifest and live that life. All that we have and all that we are belongs to God. This is a tough concept for 21st Century Americans who value our independence and our ability to be self-made, to earn our way up the ladder, to have status and stature in our communities. We all buy our houses that we own, we raise our children, we make our money and invest it. The gifts and abilities we have may come from God but they belong to us! Not so, says Jesus. It all belongs to God.

2. Playing it safe is a dead-end. Literally. The steward who buries his talent is shocked at what happens. He thinks he's done a good thing, keeping what was entrusted to him safe. He acts out of fear of what will happen if he loses everything. Sometimes I wish that Jesus had included a steward who risked the talent and lost it all, but of course it doesn't work that way because it's not essentially about money. We can't lose the basic gift of God's image that is given to us, the gift of Christ's spirit that dwells in us through baptism, even if we neglect it totally – it lies hidden in the ground of our being, waiting for us to wake up!

Jesus is concerned about the gift of Divine Life which we all too often fail to nurture. We are all afraid. This life of God that is in all of us seems daunting, overwhelming and down right dangerous. Look what happened to Jesus! If we allow God's Spirit to grow in us, we might be called to do radical things. Our friends and neighbors might shun us or we might lose all that we have because love compels us to share it! But playing it safe means we die in this world and we move into the next with very little sustaining life in us. Using another metaphor, we kill the Golden Goose – that is Christ's life in us!

3. This is the great spiritual insight: Risk brings about abundance. The more we share of our treasure (our money), the more we exercise our talents for the kingdom of God, the more time we devote to developing the inner life of Christ in us and among us in the church (our spirituality), the more of God's life we will know and experience. Generosity multiplies life exponentially. The more you give away, the more you have – money, talents, love! Michelangelo once said this: *“The great danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high, and we miss it, but that it is too low, and we reach it.”*¹

A few years ago a cartoon called the Fifth Wave by Rich Tennant showed two well dressed executive types standing on a crowded street during rush hour. Both look exasperated. One of them turns to the other and says, *“Spiritually, I believe I can manifest many good things in my life. But right now, I would settle for being able to manifest a cab”*.²

One of the many mistakes we make in this life is thinking that God's life has been given for our own use and pleasure. God's life is planted in us so that God can be manifest and known, so that we can know and love Christ in a real sense and live the abundant life of love that he offers. Jesus' understanding of stewardship is one that perpetuates generosity – for the nature of God is to give and give and give.

How much will you risk? *“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance”* Take a risk, express the life of Christ that is in you through your giving, the exercise of your abilities and attention to your inner life in Christ and see what abundance flows from it! Amen.

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¹ Quoted in Synthesis, a resource for preachers November 17, 2002, in comments by H. King Oehmig, D. Min
² Same source.