

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time + 19 November 2023 + Mt 25:14-30

My guess is that pretty much everyone here in this church today would consider themselves to be fiscally-conservative, including myself. My grandmother lost all of her savings from teaching school in the stock market crash of 1929. The rest of the family were farmers during the depression, and so they didn't have any savings to lose in the first place! So when I was growing up, having debt like a car payment, was simply unthinkable. Maybe this is why I went into accounting before seminary! So in terms of finances, being risk-averse generally serves a family well. But when it comes to our faith, our Gospel shows us today that God *wants* us to take certain risks, so as to earn a rich return.

So first, in our Gospel, we hear that a certain man has *entrusted his possessions* to his servants. Some servants he entrusts with more, some with less. The amount, however, doesn't matter, because the servants don't own anything. And this is key: it *all* belongs to the master. The servants are only asked to be good stewards of the Master's 'talents. A *talent* was a coin that amounted to roughly 20 *years'* wages for a laborer at the time of Christ, so it was a very large amount of money! Two of the stewards double their talents, and Jesus praises them with words that all of us should want to hear Him say when we die: *Well done, my good and faithful servant. Come, share your master's joy.*' In other words, these wise servants are invited to share the eternal joy of heaven with God forever.

Now the *wicked, lazy servant*, sadly buries his talent and makes no return on the Master's money. Jesus' words to him are harsh: *throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, He says, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.* The consequence of this servant's poor stewardship is eternal separation from God—a fate we can't even begin to imagine.

So immediately here we should ask 'why'? Why did that useless servant bury his talent? Well, we hear that he saw the Master as *a demanding person*, and so *out of fear*, the lazy servant says, *I went off and buried your talent in the ground.* That detail I think is very important. In every investment, there is a risk/reward relationship. The higher the risk, the greater the potential for reward, as well as a greater chance of losing everything. That risk of loss can generate a lot of fear. When my great-grandfather lost his savings in the stock market crash, the story goes that he carried his savings with him in the trunk of his car for the rest of his life. He never trusted a bank again.

So what was that *wicked, lazy servant* so afraid of, and why didn't he trust the master? Well, our Gospel leaves that question open. But I think we can come up with some likely possibilities. Remember, God is the giver of all good things—the foremost of these gifts is life itself. And then He gives us 'talents', which means our abilities, possessions, and opportunities, to love and serve Him and our fellow man each day. But, amazingly, He also gives us freedom to not only use these gifts, but also misuse these gifts, or even choose to not use them at all—to *bury them in the ground.* It's up to us.

For instance, I know a man was an executive at a multinational company whose work frequently took him to the Philippines, where he saw many orphans. After many visits, he was asked by the local mayor to start an orphanage. Now immediately he thought, *how does an American with no experience in social work start an orphanage in the Philippines?!* But the quiet voice of the Lord continued to invite Him, and he said *yes*. He took a big risk, and the return has been hundreds of children taken off the streets and given a home, food, and education. The first of these children are now even starting to graduate from college.

On the other hand, I think all of us can imagine ways in which a person can squander the gifts God has given them—be they many or few. Again, the amount and degree of talents doesn't really matter. What matters to God is that with the trust that comes from faith—a faith that is even greater than our fears—we make a good return on His gifts. But I have to add here it *does* matter if we say *yes* or *no* to God. All of us will have to give an accounting for our lives to the Lord someday. An all too common lie out there today says that all people go to heaven no matter how good or how poor stewards they are of God's gifts. Our Gospel today and especially next Sunday tears this lie apart.

With that being said, I think many people truly want to serve God well. But when they think of God's judgement, they fall into fear, wondering, *how do I know if I have made a good enough return on all the Lord has given me?* That's not an easy question to answer. But I think if we ask ourselves 2 further questions, based on this parable, we can approach an answer. First, do I see everything, and I mean *everything* in my life as a gift, or are there some things I simply refuse to submit to God's will? Next, does fear—fear of what God might ask from me, or fear of what others may think of me—hold me back from saying *yes* to God? These are good questions to bring to the Lord in prayer.

And the final question is, what do you do if you are afraid of serving God in the way He is asking you to serve Him? Well, I think it all comes down to this: even though the Gospel reveals to us the stark reality of the consequences of our stewardship, it also reveals that God *wants* us to be with Him forever. And we know this because the Father has already given us everything. He gave us creation, our lives, our talents. He even sent His Son to die for our sins, and bring us back to Him when we squandered His gifts. So the wicked, lazy servant was wrong in his assessment of the master. Yes, the master is demanding. But He is also absolutely extravagant in that He has given away all He has to us, so why should we fear giving anything back to Him?! He has given His own Son to us, with a love we can hardly imagine. So that servant had nothing to fear, and neither do we.

The man I mentioned earlier may have been afraid when God came knocking on his door. And yet those fears are now long gone, because he already has tasted a share of the Master's joy in the smiles of hundreds of orphans who call him "uncle." So let's ask the Lord to give us the grace to say *yes* to Him everyday of our lives, so that we too may hear the Lord say someday, *Well done, my good and faithful servant. Come, share your master's joy.*