

NOVEMBER 16, 2008
PENTECOST 27
“USE IT OR LOSE IT”

Let us pray: O Prodigal God, thank you for “talenting” us in the waters of baptism with the calling of being “trustees” of your precious gifts to be put to work for the sake of God’s reign. It’s in Jesus’ name that I pray. Amen.

A cartoon in my bulging cartoon file shows one character enthusing to another: “I decided to start a discount religion!” In the next frame he explains to his non-plussed conversation partner: “The tithing would be only 5% and I’d let people sin as much as they wanted.” But in the final frame he muses: “The only problem is that I don’t want to spend time with anyone who would join that sort of religion.” Which, of course, is a nice little rip-off of Mark Twain’s famous quip about not wanting to

join any club that have the likes of me as a member.

But of course the reality is that the average so-called “tithes”—which literally in scripture means a tenth of one’s income—has been even more steeply “discounted”—to use a term of our recently “discredited” so-called financial “services industry”—discounted in our contemporary church where the average offering made, studies show, is something between a paltry one and two percent of one’s income. Not only is this astounding for us Americans, at one and the same time (at least until very recently) one of the richest and most church-going people in the world.

But even more astonishing is that studies show time and again that the lower the income a church-goer has, the larger a proportion of their income they’re likely to give—bearing out Jesus’ observation regarding the widow’s mite. In other words, generosity, as a rule, seems to be a function

of what we **don't have** rather than what we **do have**. Go figure! Just as the rich young man who came to Jesus desiring to know what he needed to do to be saved left him disheartened “for he had many riches.”

What he had became a burden on the way to the reign of God, for it weighed him down rather than freeing him up to give.

The second of Jesus' end-time parables from Matthew 25 that we hear today offers us some Gospel wisdom in this matter—wisdom that reveals the good news and the bad news of what money does to us, how it both empowers and disables us. But it's our psalmody for today that really suggests the starting perspective of Jesus' story when it says: “*Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, **from everlasting to everlasting** you are God.*” And to clinch the point which, by the way, is a lightning strike upon all who would insist on a literalistic 6 days of 24 hours each as the span of God's

creating activity, “*For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.*” God’s days and our days, God’s ways and our ways, in other words, are strictly speaking “incommensurable” to use a big ten dollar word—of two different orders. “*My ways are not your ways,*” as God says in Isaiah 55.

That’s why, I think, Jesus in today’s parable uses such an outrageously large figure as a “talent,” what scholars tell us was a unit of value equivalent to twenty years wages for a common working person. So we’re meant by Jesus to have a little bit of a grin on our faces as we hear his story about the man who going on a journey, summons his slaves and simply entrusts to them this astounding amount of wealth.

To one, Jesus tells us, the man gave five talents—that is a hundred years worth of annual income; to the second, two talents, and to a third, one talent, “to each according

to his ability” Jesus carefully tells his hearers for what person — what slave! — had the “ability” to be responsible for such an extraordinary sum of money? As one biblical scholar has noted this suggests that at least one implication of the story is that God doesn’t distribute gifts or resources with monotonous uniformity or absolute equality, and that this very fact serves as a reminder that they are, after all, God’s to give, God’s to entrust. But the story simply goes on to say, “Then the man went away.” No directions to the slaves, notice. Not a word about what they’re supposed to do with this extraordinary responsibility. He simply “entrusts” the talents to them.

The action that follows is simply told: the first who received the five talents “*went off at once and traded* (the Greek word literally means “worked with them”) *and made five more talents*” and “*in the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.*” They both doubled what

had been entrusted to them—oh the good ol’ days of the bull market! “*But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.*” Which reminds me of our good friend whom we recently saw, a banker who works in municipal bonds who set our hearts aflutter when we asked him his views on the ongoing financial crisis. He told us to our mingled horror and amusement that he was keeping thousands of dollars in cash at home just in case the banks crash! Consoling I’ll tell you. Why did this slave bury his money? We don’t know yet, but we might guess that a bit of his motivation might have had to do with fear.

“*After a long time,*” Jesus continues his story, “*the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.*” You see, these weren’t gifts, after all. The man had “entrusted” to his slaves his financial resources, and they were “accountable” for them. Now the day of reckoning had arrived

but only after a “long time,” remember. So what happens?

Well, in keeping with the “rule of three” of ancient story-telling, first the one who had received the five talents comes forward, “*bringing five more talents,*” saying—we can forgive him, perhaps, for being a bit full-of-himself—“*Master, you handed over to me five talents; see I have made five more talents.*” No shenanigans here, as we might have suspected, keeping back a talent or two for himself—how would his Master have known? No false reporting—no insider trading—just an honest accounting by telling it like it is. And what is the Master’s reply?

“*Well done good and trustworthy slave.*” The word “trustworthy” literally means “faithful.” “*You’ve been trustworthy in a few things* (an extreme understatement, I’d say). *I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.*” Notice here that his reward is not a piece of

the pie—a monetary bonus—but is instead first of all yet greater responsibility and secondly the “joy” of his master.” And so too with the two-talent slave who’d also doubled his talents. The exact same response.

But now what of the third? (The suspense mounts!) The slave who was given the one talent—again, remember, an overwhelming responsibility even if only one talent—“*also came forward,*” but unlike the first two, he begins in what I can’t help but hear as a whining tone: “*Master, I knew that you were a harsh man*” —the Greek word is “skleros” as in sclerosis, literally meaning “hard” or “difficult” —not a particularly smart thing to call one’s master, I’d say. “*I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.*” What would be our equivalent? Maybe, “I know your reputation for trying to squeeze blood from a turnip?” “*So I was afraid, and*

I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, have what is yours,” and I see the poor, woe-begone guy holding out the dirt-encrusted talent he’d just dug back up out of the ground, beaming that he hadn’t lost it after all!

Quite a different response on the part of the one-talent guy, wouldn’t you say? Even to the point of his nervous, garrulous jabbering—utterly unlike the first two—revealing to his master and to us just why it was he’d failed to make a profit off what had been entrusted to him.

“Fear”—my fear of you—he seems to be telling his master, almost as if the master were to blame, claiming the status of victim, notice as in “My fear of you incapacitated me.” In other words, “It’s your fault, master, so here’s what’s yours. As if “see I haven’t lost it!” is the best the master could’ve expected from him—the lowly “one talent” slave.

The upshot, of course, is that the master hits the roof. Harsh! You want to see harsh, you wicked and lazy slave—and notice those two adjectives we don't often think of together—wicked and lazy. “*Take the talent away from him and give it to the one with the ten talents,*” the master says fuming.” “*For to all 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. As for this **worthless** slave (get the irony?!) throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*” (One of Matthew the Gospel writers favorite formulaic sayings, by the way, which he puts into Jesus' mouth at the end of several of his parables). The Gospel of the Lord???

It's a story with more than a bit of an edge to it, isn't it? What's with Jesus, God's advocate of justice, as we heard him proclaim last week—saying here that those who have will be given more while those

who have nothing will even have that taken from them. To me that sounds more like the way of this world than God's realm.

I don't know. My ancient math is pretty rusty, but it strikes me that Jesus may once again be having a little fun with us here, and that taking away the "nothing" the have-nots have may well result in their gaining something. But more than that, I think the story, remembering that it is a story full of hyperbole and exaggerated numbers, is really affirming that this is a gospel truth for us wherever we find ourselves on the world's scale of wealth. And the clear point of Jesus' story is that we are called to be "trustworthy," meaning "worthy of our Master's trust," in whatever has been entrusted to us in life—however much or little—although I think that the story suggests that we are all enormously gifted by God with the gift of life itself, not to say with a wide range of material resources.

Problem is in our contemporary world many of us don't even see ourselves in the story, as we resist the idea that what we have is not our own but as the old hymn sings, "all that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord from thee." It is an act of **bad faith**—of misplaced trust—to act as though we are "self-made" people, as though we have only ourselves to credit for our success, our income, our possessions—hard as we may have worked for them. Just look at how quickly the financial services industry has had to learn to change its absolute faith in the wisdom of the market, now that they're suffering from it and need some help. Somehow, "too big to submit to regulation" has become "too big to be allowed to fail."

Notice how even the third slave knew that what had been entrusted to him was not his own but his Master's and that a day of reckoning would come. His problem was that fear of his Master **incapacitated** him

from being the steward—the trustee—that the Master had called him to be “according to his ability.” And so out of fear—misplaced fear—the fear of responsibility—he hid his talent in the ground, disregarding his own God-given “ability.”

Here’s it’s important to note how our English word “talent” actually derives from the Greek word “talanton” used in this story which over the years has taken on the meaning of any skill or aptitude or endowment with which a person is “gifted” or “blessed”, as we like to say—like a “musical” talent or “a head for numbers” or a “knack” for fixing things. And, of course, this is a natural implication and expansion of Jesus’ story’s meaning—that it’s not only money or material possessions over which we’re called to be stewards but over the very personal aptitudes and gifts—including importantly the gift of time itself—that God has entrusted to us as well.

But as with Jesus' story—as with so many of his stories—it begins with money, knowing that money is a shorthand way of discovering what we really value. Look at a person's cancelled checks or credit card statement, someone's rightly said, and you've got a pretty good inventory of what they value, of where their heart is, as Jesus himself said.

No—we Lutherans aren't a discount religion in which tithing has been discounted to only 5% and people can sin as much as they want. In fact, as brother Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the martyr to the Nazis, reminded us ours is a “costly” faith—one in which Jesus has paid the whole cost and thereby has forgiven our sins freely, in gratitude for which we owe God not a tithe—a tenth of what we have—but for which we owe God everything and more—110% as we sometimes say, for what has been entrusted into our care but not our keeping.

And so be generous, sisters and brothers, and even daring as you put your Master's talents to work in our world, investing in every good effort to welcome the reign of God by serving justice and doing mercy and being generous with your money.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.