

Proper 28A – November 16, 2014
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; [Judges 4:1-7;] Psalm 123; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew
25:14-30

By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

You may have noticed that our alternative first reading from Zephaniah and our gospel text are like two big cactus plants—*very prickly*, to say the least. Today we are being drawn to the last days, the end time, in all our readings. This is not because we are passing through grave political, economic and environmental upheaval, but rather because we are just a couple of weeks from Advent, the season which prepares us for the celebration of the earth-shaking event of the birth of Jesus, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the One who comes to us in the full astounding in-breaking of God into human flesh-and-blood history.

In this often-read parable of the talents in Matthew's gospel, we are challenged to engage at the level of the three slaves, each of whom is entrusted with a large amount of money. Two of the three invest for gain, and are approved by their boss with more responsibility and capital. The third, fearing that the boss was "a harsh man" buries his money and tries to repay without interest. He loses his stake and is thrown out of the business.

Money is imbued with a lot of meaning, economically, psychically and spiritually—as one observer writes:

"Money is currency, from the Latin *currere*, [meaning] 'to run' or 'to flow,' evoking liquid assets, circulation and commerce, from the simplest acts of bartering to the most sophisticated versions of buying and selling, lending and borrowing, profit and loss [saving and spending]...for many [around the world] the dollar bill is emblematic of America, the embodiment of capitalism, high finance, big spending, rags-to-riches opportunity and unimaginable wealth...Money evokes psyche's currency, in the form of...values coined in multifarious [monetary] images...telling us where [our] energy is invested, accumulating or frozen, where there is wealth or impoverishment, depression or inflation, hoarding or bankruptcy...But whether or not we are able to avail ourselves of such treasure depends in part on the...the ways desire and fear direct our tendencies [to seek and] to save, spend or squander."ⁱ

Although the word "talent" in this parable refers literally to a certain weight of precious metals worth about five years' wages, we are not being summoned to engage in highly leveraged borrowing and investing. Nor are we being called to maximize profits at all costs.ⁱⁱ The real point is that Jesus is putting one urgent question before his listeners: Just what kind of God do you believe in? This is a crucial question for us. Just what kind of God do we believe in? If we believe in a God who wants to work with us, a God who trusts us, who can both challenge us to risk and forgive us when we fall short, then we will live in one way. But if we believe that God is harsh and expects only obedience, and thus expects us to curb our curiosity, creativity and to not risk anything, then we'll live in a very different way.

This parable makes me nervous, though, not so much for its reference to the final divine auditing of all humanity or the casting out of the cautious slave. No, what makes me nervous is that I was raised to think that a prudent and safe investment brings a person closer to God than even cleanliness does. An investment riskier than a passbook savings account was viewed with suspicion in my family. Making money through any method other than sweat and thrift was reckless wheeling and dealing. Now, by those standards, the servant who buried the one talent was wisely cautious, prudent, doing his job and doing it well—certainly not deserving of being cast into “outer darkness.”

But, like most of Jesus’ parables, this one defies human logic—or at least the simple kind I was raised with. Jesus clearly favors those who risk what they have, or what they’re entrusted with, in hopes of making something more of it. He likes risk-takers who are willing to lose in order to win. In this parable, Jesus tells us that there can be no faithful living that doesn’t engage in some risk-taking, and that God cannot make much use of the shut mind or the complacent heart, or the too cautious or fearful attitude. Christian commitment is not a part-time endeavor or a spectator sport, nor can it be exercised at a distance or by proxy. This parable tells us that even the virtues of discretion and prudence—cardinal virtues in my family tradition—cannot be offered as excuses for inaction or uninvolvedness. In fact, with the third servant in this parable, virtue becomes a vice. The one who is scolded and loses even what he buried is the one who will not risk or try. He doesn’t lose the master’s assets (until they are taken away from him); he just simply does nothing with them. Sure, prudence is a cardinal *virtue*—something that has been tragically absent in the high-stakes, overly-leveraged milieu which led to our global economic crisis. On the other hand, when there is an overabundance of prudence—when prudence becomes paralysis—it becomes a deadening *vice*. You can die of prudence without ever having lived. Life is supposed to be lived, not just preserved or survived. Prudence and wariness can easily devolve into self-protectiveness and unnecessary restraint as we dig a hole, rather than dare and do. Even if the one-talent servant in this parable had adventured with it and lost it, it would have been better than to do nothing with it at all.

It is also a temptation for the one-talent person to say, “I have so small a talent, and I can do so little with it, it isn’t worthwhile to try.” Recalling the theme of reckoning that runs through all our passages today, here the reckoning is for the individual or community of faith who, having even one talent, will not try to use it and will not even risk it with others for the common good. People are not equal in gifts, but people can be equal in effort. And whatever talent we have—what we do with the gold in our heart or our pocket—be it small or great, we must lay it at the service of God.

Now, further—and you are probably not surprised to hear—this parable also tells us that the reward for work done well is still more work to do. The two servants who had done well are not told to lean back and rest on their laurels. Instead, they are given greater tasks and greater responsibilities and entrusted with greater resources in the work of the master, work they were empowered to do by virtue of putting their gifts to use earlier.

The choice about all this is left up to us. We can live like we are ineffectual. And we can live like God is ineffectual, too, or even non-existent, meaningless in our day. We can live like God is rigid or wrathful, so that we bury our talents and don't dare risk making a mistake for fear of failing in the eyes of God, or of others or ourselves, depending from where that voice of perfectionism seems to be coming.

Or, we can live as though who we are and what we have comes from Someone who loves us unceasingly. We can live recognizing each new day is a gift, too, calling us out to take chances and plant seeds, and see what grows.

How is the world distressed and battered, even threatened with ending, through the belief that God isn't there, or doesn't matter, or is so rigid a judge that we dare not risk who we are and what we have? What outer darkness do we create for ourselves and others out of our fear and the burying of our gifts and talents and treasure? These are the questions raised by this parable. At the end of time we will all be justified before God—brought into right relationship. Yet here and now, both individually and collectively as members of one another here in this parish and in the wider world, we are called to realize that all our faith and love and hope—and all our time and talent and treasure—are nothing without some daring, giving and acting.

To conclude, let us note our second reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, which offers us a small sunny space for rest between the giant cactus trees of our other two readings. Paul reminds us that the final day of the Lord does not have to surprise us like a thief in the night. Paul's words are words of power, not of fear: don't worry about thieves in the night if you are being children of the light. Keep awake. Make faith, love and hope your defense. Most of all, encourage one another and build one another up. And since God means to save us all, the odds are in our favor.

ⁱ From "Money" in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 524.

ⁱⁱ Jesus is *not* promoting or condoning the type of behavior, the consequences of which have presently left our global economy in dire straits, in a very precarious state.