

MONEY AS TEACHER

November 16, 2008–Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today's collect has to be one of my favorites. We pray that we might learn from our Holy Scriptures..and read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them. For me, this is more than just reading the Bible. It means to take the words, the thoughts, and the concepts into to us so they might nurture and sustain us. Today's Gospel from Matthew challenges us to think about our responsibility related to money. How convenient! It's stewardship time in the Church!

Here we are, it's the end of the Church year coming and the Scriptures focus us on the end times of human history. The underlying theme here is the day of reckoning, or the Day of Judgment that is coming. Each of us will have to stand before God and give an accounting of our lives at the final judgment. We might do well to ask ourselves, "What must we do to prepare for the coming judgment when Jesus returns?"

To help us focus even more, we have the second in a series of three parables from Matthew 25. Last week, it was the wise and foolish virgins. This week it is the wise and foolish servants. Next week it's the separation of the sheep and goats. All of them have to do with judgment. All of them are Jesus' teaching about how we are called to live our lives in the community of faith.

It's ironic for me that we have mention of the word "invested" in the Gospel. It's even more ironic that several months ago, the Stewardship Committee used the word "investing" for our stewardship statement. Now we are faced with an economic crisis that sees our monetary investments falling away every day! We are challenged today to ask, "Where are we investing our lives? Where's God in all of this?"

What does the Bible teach us today? There is a message of hope. There is the promise of joy..but it will mean that we will have to do things differently! To be a disciple of Jesus Christ, we have to remember that our wealth has been entrusted to us. There will be a day of accounting. We are empowered to take risks, but hiding our treasure will not do. I do not think Jesus was a capitalist or a socialist. Today's Gospel is not about an economic policy. It's about our relationship with God..and how we use money gives us insight into that relationship!

Jesus speaks of a talent today. This is not the talent definition that we think of..it's not about having the talent to play the piano or sing, the talent to play sports..it's not about something we are skilled or good at. A talent was a measure of money. It was 6,000 drachmas or denari's. One denari's was equal to a day's wages for a laborer. If we were to use today's money numbers, a talent would be equal to almost \$1 million! Five talents were \$5 million. Two talents were \$2 million. We're talking about a lot of money! It was a tremendous amount of money!

Jesus talks about money a lot in the Gospels. In his day, like ours, money represented many things... possessions, power, status, security and more. Here Jesus is talking about how God entrusts us with great treasure. It's not "our" money, it's not our treasure...we are given it as stewards, caretakers. We have a responsibility to use it wisely and we will have to stand before the Lord to give an accounting one-day. Wow! God gives us a tremendous treasure!

Have you ever noticed the phrase, "each according to his ability"? I used to worry about this passage. What? God doesn't give equally to all of us? No! God loves us all equally. God offers grace and forgiveness to us equally..but when it comes to the handouts from God..we are given what God thinks we can handle. For some this will mean more and for others, less. What follows is the day of accounting..the

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day we have to stay before God. What have we done with what God has given us? What will we tell Jesus Christ when we stand before him and see our whole life played out in front of us? If this makes you nervous, it does for me, we're not alone! We should be nervous! What will we say? "Umm..I meant to do more!" "Umm..I've been intending to get to that?" "Umm..well, I've been busy, or I have a lot of bills, or I haven't have enough time?" We will all be the same, we will make excuses for what we haven't done.

We see two responses in Jesus' parable. The first two servants, the ones with five and two talents act in similar ways. They take some risks, they double the treasure entrusted to them! When the master returns, notice what is said to them. They get the SAME response! Both are treated equally! "Good job! You've been faithful! I'm going to give you more responsibility! ENTER INTO MY JOY!" The promise of taking a risk with our faith, the promise of growth, the promise of doing something is joy! This is good news!

But notice the other servant. He operates out of fear. He hides the money. It reminds us of all these people that have taken up stuffing their mattresses once again! We do this out of fear. We don't take risks. We do nothing. When the master returns, the servant tries to rationalize his actions. He criticizes the master! I wonder how far we would get telling the boss you take what's not yours! Fear paralyzes the servant..and as a result..he is left with nothing. He is rejected! Jesus is issuing a warning to all of us that if we refuse to do something with the gifts that God gives us, we too risk rejection.

We might translate this today into two common types of people in the Church. They are those who prepare and those who preserve. When Jesus comes, he will meet these two different types. The preparers are those who are action oriented. They want to grow in their faith. They are willing to take risks. They do so because they have trust in God. They have glimpsed the promise of joy and take up bold initiatives. These are the people who say, "Let's find a way to make this work!" There is a confidence of faith that they possess. They know that sharing is important. These are disciples who come in life because of the way they live.

The others are the preservers. These are the people more concerned with hoarding what they have. They want to play it safe. They are afraid to do anything because, God forbid, they might make a mistake! This fear makes them unable to do anything but be janitors of a dying faith or church. They simply sweep up the dirt and pieces as everything decays. In their efforts to preserve their customs, they lose their relationship with God and others. These are the people obsessed with security and end up hiding their faith. The result that awaits them..is death.

God has given us a staggering amount of wealth. The greatest gift is Jesus! But have we been profitable in our faith? Have we made anything like a profit for God? There's another way we might think of this. The holiday season is approaching, and what do we want to do? We want to give to our children, our family and friends. It brings us great joy! This is how God is with us! God loves to see us happy! God gives us so much, and it gives God great happiness to see us do things with the treasure entrusted to us.

The challenge to us to take the tremendous wealth entrusted to us..to participate actively and creatively with our faith..and produce! The gifts entrusted us are to be used..because that is the only way we will see an increase. We might start by answering some questions: What did God give us? What are we doing with God's gifts? What could we be doing with God's gifts?

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Faith that is alive and growing is faith that takes risks. It does so because of trust. It does so because it has hope and sees the promise of joy just on the horizon. Faith like this gives abundantly. And it leads us to the place where we'll receive God's joy!

In this atmosphere of fear and anxiety, when people are tempted to pull back, to hoard and do nothing, people of faith are challenged to do the opposite! We have been given so much. We might do well to remember this when the stewardship pledge cards come around. It's one of the ways we can grow, where we can do good in the Name of God.

So..how are we doing? Are we foolish or wise? Where are we being asked to take a risk, a leap of faith? God promises great joy for us..wouldn't that be a great thing to embrace now?