

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Matthew 25:14-30

This Sunday we listen to the Parable of the Talents, a story that has shaped my religious imagination deeply. My parents took very seriously their God-given responsibility to form their kids into holy, productive adults. They expected us to work hard at it too. When reprimanding us, my dad used to say, "When you stand before almighty God, He's not going to ask about what (INSERT THE NAME OF MY FELLOW MISCREANT HERE) did. He's going to ask about you!" The Parable of the Talents reinforced this vision of God's expectations for me. I was well into adulthood before I could give much credence to God's view of the lilies of the field or to Paul's emphasis on unearned salvation.

However, you may be turned off by this terrifying story of the decisive master who has the third servant thrown into "the darkness outside where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Yet, we are all meant to ride the crescendo, building toward Jesus' last parable, "The Final Judgement" that immediately follows. Jesus wants us to realize the urgency of our "now." After all, who knows where we will be in two days? Jesus was arrested two days after he told this story. Our "now" is all we have.

Walking this morning, I saw seven leaves of vibrant Virginia creeper, rising up to the morning sun over the dead meadow grasses. The creeper was deep scarlet against the gray, a small patch of life upon an acre of death. At first I thought, "Oh, the one person who chooses to do the good while everyone else chooses evil!" But then I realized, "No, it is all me." For the reality of me is that I am insufficient because of sin, the wounds others have given me and my limitations and still, I am creative and loving. The leaves of the Virginia creeper could only rise up to share their beauty with the support of the dead grasses with which they shared the soil; likewise, the beauty of me arises because of my brokenness. God does good even with my limitations and poor choices. I am more beautiful because of them.

If "now" is all we have and who we are is people capable of beauty through our ugliness, what does this parable have to say? It is as much an allegory as a parable, begging us to compare it with our lives. When the master entrusts his slaves with tremendous amounts of his estate, we are meant to think of how God entrusts us with great responsibilities. (I have always loved that the Greek word *talanton*, a coin worth fifteen years' of pay, sounds so like our English word *talent*.) The master did not have to do this, but it was common when a slave was especially capable. God knows each of us are especially capable. God then gives us responsibilities that match our capabilities, as the master gives varying amounts of talents to his slaves. Vocations are not some great mystery: God has written them in our gifts. Most importantly, the talents actually belong to the master, who gives them as an invitation to make them grow. We co-create the world with God, not apart from God. I do not need to save the world nor figure out how. God and I work on my little part together. As the master rejoices in the accomplishments of the first two slaves, God's rejoices over jobs we accomplish together; God is part of our good works the way the master's money is what makes the profits possible.

The third slave does not see the master this way. To him, the master is "a demanding person, harvesting where [he] did not plant and gathering where [he] did not scatter." The slave reacts with fear and shuts down all possibility for growth and creativity. What kind of fear is this? The master points out that if the slave were afraid he did not have the ability to produce – a valid concern – he could have let the banks, filled with fiscally talented people, make money for him. The fear is a front for what is really going on in the heart of the slave: he does not want to work with the master to increase the master's wealth. What is God's "wealth?" Justice, mercy, the well-being and dignity of all people, the glory of a healthy planet, creativity, life itself! For us to work on any of that with God means we have to believe it is worthwhile to do so. But if we increase the wealth and dignity of people who are not like us, won't we lose something? Aren't things better when we are in charge or can do what we want without concern for the planet or for others? These questions are real for each one of us every day. Every day, in our "now," God invites us to use the wealth of talent we have to love our neighbors as ourselves. Do we think this endeavor is worthwhile?

- ❖ How do your past failings and scars enable you to love better now?
- ❖ What gets in the way of you using your talents fully in God's service?