

Homily - November 19th, 2023
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time



Once again Jesus gives us a parable that does not tie things up in a neat package with a bow around it. Parables are meant to stretch us, to take us out of our small worlds, our small kingdoms and invite us to consider what the Kingdom of God is like. We will only let go of our little kingdom if we are convinced we are getting a bigger kingdom in exchange. But letting go has never been our strong point.

The ending of this parable is like the ending of all parables...problematic. The slave who started off with the five talents, in the end, finishes with 11 talents, if you were keeping track. In addition to the five talents, he started with, and the five more he made for his master, this slave is also given the talent of the slave who previously buried his in the ground (5+5+1=11).

Jesus is preaching to simple folks who are just getting by financially under strict Roman taxation. They may have had a problem with the end of this parable where the rich seem to be getting richer and the poor poorer. It's not about that, but like all parables, you have to go deeper. Human dynamics and spiritual dynamics are different; what is flesh is flesh, but what is spirit is spirit. Let's see if we can uncover the spiritual dynamic at work in this parable.

A false interpretation of this parable is that it is promoting unbridled capitalism. In this interpretation obtaining the maximum profit, any way you can, is the goal. If that's the case, that God behaves no better than the rich, greedy master, who needs God? This false interpretation that God is interested more in capitalism than love, justice, and mercy has been the rallying cry of almost all the televangelists you have ever see on television. It's something coined in the last 20 years as the "prosperity gospel." It was started in the 1950s by televangelists Oral

Roberts and Jim Bakker, but it was popularized only in the last 20 years by equally shady characters like Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, John Hagee, and Joyce Meyers to name a few. The “prosperity gospel” is no gospel at all. The only ones who prosper are these televangelists who justify owning multi-million dollar mansions, private jets, exclusive resorts, and luxury cars. This parable we heard today is often used by these false prophets to justify their luxuriant lifestyles bought often at the expense of the poor and shamefully done so in the name of God.

So, if this parable isn't about the rich getting richer, and if it isn't about the “prosperity gospel” which doesn't exist, then what might it be saying to us?

One of the things it's about is “joy”. Regardless of whether you turn five talents into 10, or two talents into four, the Master celebrates you and cannot wait to share his joy with you. It's not money that the Master delights in giving away; it's joy. Had the slave who was given the one talent increased that gift, even in the slightest, the Master would have thrown a party for him as extravagant as the party thrown for the other two. Jesus' prayer the day before he dies on the Cross is, ***“Father, may the joy you placed in me, be also in them, and may their joy be complete.”***

What hinders joy? Fear. ***“I was afraid, so I hid the talent you gave me in the ground. Here have what is yours.”*** What was he afraid of? ***“I heard that you were a harsh man.”*** That's what he heard, and that's what he feared. But that's not what the Master was at all. Harsh is not the adjective that best describes the Master. Two better adjectives that describe the Master are the words “generous.” and “trusting.” The Master entrusted the first slave with five talents, which is the equivalent of 80 years' worth of wages. What boss would trust any of us with 80 years' worth of money? Even the slave given the one talent was entrusted with a lot of money--16 years' worth of salary. The idea of entrusting them with so much money was not so that they could stick it in a hole. The Master could have buried the money himself, for safekeeping, as far as that goes. The Master is both trusting and generous.

It was like the Master had given his slaves seeds to use while he was gone and this third slave put them carefully in a cupboard, saying that he was keeping them safe from floods, droughts, or a plague of locust. The Master handed over his fortune to his slaves so that they could keep his business going. The more they shared in the Master's mission, the more they became like him, and the more they became like the Master, the more they shared in his joy. When the Master returned, he didn't look at the amounts and rejoice more for a return of five talents than the return of two. To both of those servants he said, "***Come, share your master's joy,***" which was another way of saying, "Come to my feast!"

Back in 1992, I spent the summer living and working at a L'Arche community called Daybreak. It's a community of intellectually handicapped individuals, called core members, who live with assistants. I felt overwhelmed being placed, on day one, in a house with the most severely handicapped core members, who were all teenagers at the time. I recall one day how we threw a party, along with cake and balloons, for one of the core members named Heather. It wasn't her 16th birthday, or her graduation, or any reason like that. We celebrated because after 16 years, Heather was able to write the letter H for the first time. Heather was given one talent and made the most of it. She heard on that day, "Come, share in my joy, and invite everyone in the house to the party." The joy Heather radiated was contagious and enveloped everyone in the house.

It's not how much we are given; it's what we do with it that counts. One talent buried is not one talent saved; it's one talent lost. Every single talent is needed to complete construction of the Kingdom of God. Every one of them needs to be celebrated.

Each of us has been given a gift, and when we share that gift, we enter deeper and deeper into the joy of the One who gave it to us in the first place, God. When we share our talent, it is like Jesus sharing the five loaves and the two fish and feeding 5,000 hungry mouths. When we give from the place of spirit, things multiply and become more. Five talents multiply into 10; two talents multiply into four. In the

spiritual life you only have what you give away, and what you give away becomes more. Contrastingly, whatever you hold onto divides and becomes less. Use it or lose it.

So, in the end it's not about capitalism, nor is it about the "prosperity gospel." It's about risk taking. This parable is about risk-takers, and what happens when we risk and what happens when we don't take risks. When Jesus was finished telling the parable, the people were left to puzzle it in their minds. By the time they looked up, he was already halfway to Jerusalem risking it all for us on the Cross.

~Fr. Phil