

11-19-23 A Proper 28, The Talents

Fr. Joseph

Every once in a while, the Bible's English translators

decided that, instead of trying to find an English equivalent for a word, they would just transliterate the Greek or Hebrew word instead. That often happens with money.

So you will find English translations that include foreign words like drachmas or a shekels or staters. That is the case with today's readings.

The Greek word *ταλαντον* is usually transliterated into English as a "talent." In its original meaning, a talent is a large sum of money -- a very large sum of money, roughly equivalent to fifteen times the annual wages of a typical day laborer. Precisely because of the wide circulation of this story in the Middle Ages, the word, "talent," eventually took on an entirely different meaning in English as a term denoting God-given abilities, gifts and

graces. But as the word is used in this story, it is really talking about money, not talent.

The Parable of the Talents (or more accurately, “The Parable of the Really Big Piles of Cash”) is one of a series of short parables about last things, the *Eschaton* and final judgment. Each of these stories tells us something about what God is looking for in us, what qualities God approves of, and what qualities have no place in the kingdom.

In the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids which we heard last week, Jesus praises the bridesmaids who have brought enough oil to last them through the night; while to those whose lamps have run dry he says, “Truly I say to you, I do not know you.” This is a teaching, not only about being willing to receive the Lord at any time when he might come to you, but also about doing the work that is necessary to prepare yourself for his

coming, not just at the end of time, but at any time he might wish to come into your heart.

Then we come to today's parable, the Parable of the Talents. This is a very interesting parable indeed. The king leaves each of three servants in charge of a very large sum of money. In today's terms it would be about one-and-a-quarter million, a half-million dollars, and a quarter-million dollars, give or take. The king goes away on a journey, and leaves his stewards with no instructions about what they are to do with these large sums. When he returns, the first servant has turned the million-and-a-quarter into two-and-a-half-million. The second servant has turned half-a-million into a million.

To these first two, the king says, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant!" But the third servant was more careful and more timid. He held on to what he had

been given and kept it just as he had received it. The king is furious. He takes the money away from him, gives it to the servant who already has two-and-a-half-million, and throws him out.

What Jesus is teaching is what it means to be a “good and faithful servant.” It does not mean ‘believing the right things,’ or being theologically or dogmatically correct. Nor does it mean strict obedience to clear directives, because no directives were given. Rather, what the good and faithful servants did was take active responsibility for what was given into their care, taking initiative, and taking risks -- *reaping where they did not sow and gathering where they did not scatter seed.*

I always felt badly for the unprofitable servant. He took great care of what he had been given, making sure that it was safely hidden from thieves, making sure that the tremendous treasure with which he had

been entrusted was not put at any risk. The lawyer in me says, this is the guy you want as your fiduciary or your banker. Yes, those other two doubled their master's money; but you don't make that kind of profit without taking some extraordinary risks. They were just as likely to have lost everything as they were to have turned a profit. Are those the guys you want managing your money? Maybe they got lucky this time; but what about next time?

Apparently, that's exactly the kind of guy God wants guarding the bank, someone who will risk everything, someone, say, like Jesus - who risked everything. If the Bible teaches us anything, it teaches us that God does not value things in the same way that the world does. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord." (Is 55:8.) Ours is a God that takes risks, and they are not small risks: God gave us free will, an enormous risk to take with creation; and God became human

seeking to reconcile us in love to Godself, risking the Cross and death for the sake of love. These aren't the kind of risks that most of us would consider reasonable.

Our God takes risks, and God wants us to be risk-takers, too -- not thrill seekers, not gamblers taking any risk that comes along -- but taking risks that are consistent with God's loving and generous nature, and risks that are consistent with God's purpose of reconciling the world to Godself. For that purpose, God is willing to risk everything, and so should we be. These aren't risks taken for the sake of a thrill; but they are thrilling, nonetheless.

So what do we learn from all these parables about the final judgment? We learn what it is that God is seeking to find in us. In the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids we learn that God wants us to be ready to receive Him into our hearts at any moment, and wants us to do whatever it takes to stay

prepared for that moment.

Then, in the Parable of the Really Big Piles of Cash we learn that God wants us to take what we have received and run with it.

Take risks. God did not give us anything, not even the Church, that we should hold onto it, keeping it and treasuring it just the way we received it. God wants us to seize the initiative, to assume responsibility on our own, and to take risks so that God's kingdom may grow and prosper upon the earth.

I have to say, whether you understand this parable to be about the physical gifts God has placed in your care, such as a large sum of money, or the unique talents that God has given you, such as music, art, cooking, or writing, the message is the same. Put those gifts to use for God's sake. Don't hide them away. Use them. Take risks with them.

To this I will add one last observation. The

qualities that Jesus' parables lift up as essential are not just qualities by which we will stand or fall at judgment. These are also the qualities and habits of character that lead to a whole and happy life right here and right now. We are created in the image of God, and we cannot be whole or happy unless we live in a way that honors what we are. So be what you have been created to be, and you will find wholeness and happiness: Seize the initiative; assume responsibility; and risk it all for the sake of reconciling love-- specifically, for the love of God and the love of your fellow man.