

Homily for the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

November 19, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31 (A worthy wife is of immense value.)

Responsory: Psalm 128 (Blessed are those who fear the Lord.)

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 (The day of the Lord will come like a thief at night.)

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30 (The parable of the talents.)

Last weekend the parable of the wise and foolish virgins prompted us to consider how to prepare ourselves to meet the Lord at any moment. That theme also underlies today's gospel, the parable of the talents. For this story is about more than just using our gifts well. It's also about coming before the Lord and giving him an account of our stewardship of those gifts.

In the parable, each of the three servants is given stewardship over a certain amount of wealth. We don't know exactly how much, because a "talent" was a measure of *weight*, not monetary value. Jesus doesn't specify whether these are talents of gold, or silver, or something of lesser value. What matters, though, is that each servant is given a substantial amount, and all three servants receive significantly *different* amounts: five talents for one, two for another, and only one for the third. It's also clear that the Master sees these talents as *responsibilities*, not personal *gifts*. The money still belongs to the Master, and he expects his servants to do something productive with it. That's why he apportions the money according to the servants' abilities, giving rise to our modern definition of "talents." The most capable (or "talented") receives the most, and the least capable receives the least. Still, regardless of how much any particular servant has received, the Master expects all of them to show some initiative, without any explicit instructions from him. It's up to the servants to figure out how to ensure that the Master will get back more than just his original investment upon his return.

This, I think, is where the theme of preparedness comes in. Jesus says that the Master returns "after a long time," suggesting that the servants have no idea when the Master is coming back. But they know for a fact that he *will* show up someday, and when he does, he *will* settle accounts with them. So, although the element of *surprise*, which featured so prominently in last week's parable, is not emphasized as much in this story, *accountability* is stressed even more. These servants know that the day will come when they will have to stand before their Master and answer for what they have done, or what they have failed to do, as stewards of his property. Their day of reckoning will surely come, whether they're ready or not.

What's really interesting, though, is that only one of the servants is intimidated by that prospect of facing the Master and being held to account. The others *welcome* it eagerly. They see this as their opportunity to show the Master what they have accomplished. We can imagine the first two servants grinning proudly as they hand over their funds, saying, "Master, you gave me [this number of] talents. See, I have doubled your investment." Only the third servant stares dejectedly at the floor, saying, "Master, I was afraid of you, and afraid of losing your money. So, I just buried it. Here, you can have it back."

There's an important lesson here for us. Whether we *fear* or *look forward* to meeting the Lord has a big impact on our stewardship of his gifts, just as it does in the parable. If we are afraid that the Lord will be angry or disappointed with us because of our failings, then we tend to play it safe and do very little with the substantial gifts that the Lord has entrusted to us. If, on the other hand, we have confidence in the Lord's kindness and mercy, we tend to take more initiative and explore our gifts more freely. We can take greater risks, and discover potential that we never knew we had. As we learn from the parable, avoiding failure should never be our main objective, because that is *not* God's main concern. He wants us to be productive, to use what he has given us to accomplish great things.

The main message of the parable obviously is seen in that contrast between the two *productive* servants, whose efforts are rewarded, and the *unproductive* servant, who ends up being condemned. But we should also notice how the Master responds to the first two servants. We might expect him to be more pleased with the more "talented" servant, who receives much more and produces much more as a result. But that doesn't appear to be the case. Though one servant proudly presents *ten* talents to his Master, while the other gives him only *four*, the Master seems equally pleased with both of them. To emphasize that point, Jesus has the Master speak the *exact same words* of approval to both servants: "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy." So, what matters most to the Master is *not* his servants' *accomplishments*, but rather, the good *stewardship* of their gifts which they have demonstrated. We need to remember that lesson as we apply our own gifts and talents.

Just imagine if that servant with the two talents had moped around, complaining that the Master had given him so much less than his fellow servant. What if he had told himself that he could do a lot with *five* talents, but two just weren't enough to accomplish anything meaningful? Unfortunately, that's how many of us tend to think. Instead of appreciating all that has been given to us, we become envious of other people's gifts. We tell ourselves that if I'm not blessed in the same way, or to the same degree, as some other person, then I'm useless. That's how we talk ourselves into burying our talents and producing nothing, like the third servant in the parable. Whenever we compare ourselves to other people, or see life as a competition rather than a collaboration, we can fail ourselves and God.

What is needed is gratitude to God *and* trust in ourselves. God has blessed all of us with many gifts, which endow us with many possibilities. To be sure, the talents are *not* distributed equally, just as we see in the parable. But that should not discourage any of us from exploring, developing and using our gifts to the utmost. Like the Master in the story, God is not going to compare us to anybody else or hold us to some arbitrary standard. He's going to judge each one of us according to what we have done with what he has given us. So, let us all be grateful for our talents, and see what we can do with them. Hopefully, when our day of reckoning comes, all of us will get to hear those reassuring words: "Well done, my good and faithful servant... Come, share your master's joy."