

**SERMON**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA**  
**The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy")**  
**November 13, 2011**

<p><b>The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost</b> <b>Proper 28A, Revised Common Lectionary</b> <b>Matthew 25:14-30</b></p>
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In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Consider for a moment, "Average Joe" and "Average Jane." Joe and Jane are married, and they have between one and three children. Joe and Jane own their own home, which they bought with credit. They may or may not be college educated, and they expect to bring home a combined total of \$51,000 before taxes. Average Joe and Average Jane approximate the median American household.<sup>1</sup>

Joe and Jane are doin' fine. They don't have a lot of luxuries, but they're able to make ends meet. That said, Joe and Jane know that some day they will some day need to retire. They know that the mortgage will need to be paid off. And, they know that at least one of their kids is probably going to want to go to college.

Today, Joe and Jane are doin' fine, but they know that their median income won't cut it for long. Joe and Jane, like most of us, need help planning for tomorrow.

Enter now, Broker Bill. Broker Bill helps Joe and Jane establish a college savings plan, open an IRA, and refinance their mortgage. Joe and Jane like Broker Bill, because the bottom line on each of their quarterly statements is consistently larger than it was the quarter before.

Broker Bill's success or failure is measured solely by the returns he can generate for Joe and Jane. It's all busines. Joe and Jane have hired Broker Bill to help them make money, and money is the standard on which he will be judged.

In today's reading from St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus shares the Parable of the Five Talents: As a man leaves on a journey, he gives each of his slaves a large sum of money. The first two slaves receive more than the third, but each is able to double what he has. The third slave, fearing retribution if even a penny were to be lost, buries his treasure in the ground. He returns to his master everything that is his, but instead of being rewarded for his stewardship, he is condemned to the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The third slave trembles before his master, a single, soil-stained coin quivering in his clammy palms. His knees are weak, his heart is racing, and his tears are welling up. This is his day of reckoning, and it is terrible indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> Demographics based loosely on the American Fact Finder 2010: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>

The slave comes before his master expecting judgment, praying for grace. But, grace will never come. His master's heart is hardened. There will be no mercy for the slave, no compassion for his fear. The slaves' task was to make money, and money is the standard on which they will be judged.

In judging his slaves, the master uses the same standard Average Joe and Average Jane use to judge Broker Bill. Yet, somehow, I have more room in my heart for Joe and Jane than I do for the master, a man identified as harsh and avaricious.

The traditional interpretation of this parable would have us associate ourselves with the slaves, and God with the master. This interpretation implores us to do the most we possibly can with the resources God has given us. It reminds us that there will be a day of reckoning, when — as the old version of the Creed puts it — Christ comes again “to judge both the quick and the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

However, this traditional interpretation falls flat for us in that it describes God as “a harsh man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed.” This cannot be God.

The Holy Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments bear witness to the fact that ours is a God of love. As one biblical writer will go so far as to say, “God *is* love.”<sup>3</sup>

My sisters and my brothers in Christ, the relationship of an investor to her broker does not parallel the relationship of God to the people he created, the people he chose, the people he redeemed. God has entrusted to us a great abundance. Indeed, God has entrusted to us everything that is. But, God has given us this greatness out of the greatness of his love, not in the hope of material gain.

Does this imply that the Parable of the Five Talents is without meaning for us? By no means!

I said before that I had more room in my heart for Average Joe and Average Jane than I had for the cruel master in Jesus' parable. I identify with Joe and Jane because they are so very much like me, and perhaps like many of you: hard-working, middle class folk, hoping to secure for themselves and their children a prosperous future.

Joe and Jane don't want to receive any more than is their due, but they can't afford to let their money sit idle, either. They can't afford to bury their savings in the ground, only to dig it up fifty years later without a penny of interest.

So, they invest what they can spare, and they watch their statements closely. They rejoice when they enjoy strong returns, and they get angry they don't. This approach to investing is morally neutral; there is nothing inherently right or wrong about it, and the feelings are natural. Too often, however, our investor's eye for money begins to influence our approach to life more generally, and that is problematic.

As I describe the relationship between God and myself, one of us is indeed harsh and grasping, but it's not God. In terms of both time and money, I often find myself giving to God only that which I think I can spare, and I expect him to double it every time. When he does, I rejoice. When he

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<sup>2</sup> The Nicene Creed, Rite I. *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 328.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:8 (NRSV)

doesn't, I get angry. And, in my anger, I accuse God of being unfaithful and unloving. I cast him to the very margins of my life, grieving his heart and setting his teeth on edge.

God has given us everything we have and everything we are: the beauty of creation, the wonder of life, and the mystery of love. From our abundance, he expects us to give away a generous plenty, so that he might double it in our midst. But, he also expects us to trust him, remaining faithful, even when things don't go the way we had planned.

In next week's gospel reading, Jesus will tell his disciples that all the good and evil they do to the least among them, they have actually done to unto him.<sup>4</sup> Jesus will personally identify with the slave that the master cast into the outer darkness, and challenge us to regard him as though he were Christ.

Every day, we are called to make decisions about how to use the resources that God has given us. We choose whether to live in a spirit of scarcity or a spirit of abundance. We choose whether to give God what we can spare, or a generous plenty that he can double in our midst.

My prayer for us this day is that we will have the courage to do the latter.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Proper for Christ the King Sunday (Matthew 25:31-46)