

Sermon

11.19.23

Proper 28, Year A

Good morning, St. Dunstan Family and Happy Thanksgiving Week!

Just in case anyone here has forgotten, it's Thanksgiving week. Big things are happening on Thursday!

I love to hear a good story. This specific holiday meant time with extended family which I loved. My family loved sharing good stories. I remember sitting at the feet of my grandfather as he shared story after story about his hunting experiences in the deep woods of Southeastern Oklahoma. He was born in 1917 and had plenty of stories to share.

There's another group of people who also love hearing stories. I have no doubt folks crowded around to hear Jesus share. You just know Jesus had to be the ultimate storyteller!

Today's Gospel comes from the end of Matthew chapter 25, but we have to back up to Matthew 24 to get our setting. This is known as the **other** sermon on the mount. Jesus is sitting again on the Mount of Olives. As we learned last week from Fr. Roman, this is the third of four stories where Jesus talks about the implications of the future and the 'uncalendared' eschaton.

You may be thinking, "Hold up Rev. Leesa.... what does eschaton mean? I know I have heard that word before but what does it mean?" Christianity teaches that the *eschaton*, or the end of all things, is fulfilled in Christ's kingdom, in perfect peace.

All three stories center on the **return** of a master or a bridegroom or a king. Also, the stories center the conclusions that come with the return or reuniting, and how those who wait for them and how they spent their time.

Today's story focuses on the return of a master from a long journey.

As I was studying, it was suggested that I might approach this story about the wealthy man who entrusts his property to three servants by talking to an investment manager or someone who works in what is called the "wealth management industry." So, I did. I called my baby brother,

Jeff. He has his own wealth management firm in Oklahoma City. We spoke briefly about high risk investments. Then he made this statement, “Everything works, until it doesn’t.”

Then what do you I thought as I let his words soak in for a little while. Sounds risky to me.

Some think this parable is mainly about stewardship. Others think it is about faithfulness. I was discussing this passage with Fr. Roman and in less than 15 minutes he gave me three different approaches. The final discussion resonated with me, where we discussed relationships. And that is really resounded with me. This parable is about **relationships**.

The parable or story has to do with the three servants. Out of what could have been several servants, the master focuses his attention only on three. Next, the man divides between these servants an extravagant amount of cash—possibly the equivalent of over two million dollars. He had to have been extremely wealthy, because later he will refer to this large sum as “over a little” or “you have been trustworthy in a few things” in Matthew 25: 21. This parable also has to do with some confusion regarding the true character of the master.

The master **knows** his servants well enough to divide the money according to **their** abilities.

The master knows his staff, his people.

You see, life is all about relationships! Here Jesus is pointing out relationship issues that we can learn from.

Note, also, what is **not** at the center of the story: the two servants who actually made the good investments. In spite of receiving a different amount of cash and appearing before the master at different times, these two are rather similar but don’t have the center focus.

Listen for a moment...

Whispers start, then shouts of joy are called. “The master is coming!” The slap of sandals on hard dirt can be heard hustling over. One runs to the well for a cup of cool water. You know how it feels to have a cold drink of water when you get in from a long trip.

After a long time, the master returns from his journey. Soon he calls the three servants to come near and give an account for themselves. Perhaps the master has some great anticipation, hope!

Just as he had expected, the first servant doubled his money.

This is the first time we, the readers, get to hear the words we all hope to hear someday: “**Well done, good and faithful servant.**” So, the first servant gets a promotion as a reward. Interesting to notice that Jesus did not emphasize freedom as the ultimate prize; but serving the master well and sharing in his joy.

In a similar fashion, the second servant who doubled his investment was treated with the same reward. One translation says, “Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner!”

So now the focus really shifts:

The third servant appears before his master.

It’s true, the master expected the least from him but still trusted him.

This servant failed to fulfill any profitable expectation.

Why? The reason is this- the third servant did not take personal responsibility. He **blames** the severity of his master.

His excuse? The master is a difficult man. Albeit that had not been the experience of the other two servants.

According to the servant, the master’s expectations were impossible. Once again- the story shows this accusation is not congruent with what has been described by the other two witnesses.

Given the evidence of the parable, nothing could be further from the truth.

The master had basically divided two million dollars among three servants and had maintained his expectations according to each of their abilities.

The servant’s final excuse: he was **afraid** and so he simply hid the money. **Fear** kept this servant from **experiencing risk**. His own fear paralyzed his relationship with the master and paralyzed him from risking or **being vulnerable**. Apparently, this 3rd servant never watched Dr. Brené Brown. She is a world-famous social work research professor who has spent decades studying and teaching about courage, vulnerability, and shame. Her TED talk, The Power of Vulnerability, is one of the top five most viewed TED talks in the world with over 35 million views.

She defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.

What exactly is RISK:

Risk means taking a chance, trying something new. Possibly failing **or** succeeding.

We all must experience risk in our lives. Taking chances is one of the most crucial ways in which we grow, especially in relationships. Could it be that the master wanted to help his servants grow, become better individuals?

The other 2 servants had a working relationship with their boss. They understood risk and it's possible they decided to risk not only the investing but also receiving the reaction of their master because they had a mutual understanding, a mutual respect of one another.

When reading this portion of scripture, throughout my life, I had never taken the perspective of the man, the investor. I had always thought it was simply unfair how he treated the poor servant who only got one talent and hid it.

I had to engage new meaning, a different thought process, entertain a fresh perspective.

In making a new meaning for this parable I began to realize that the third servant must have had a different experience with the master based on a half-truth. The third servant's **idea** of who the Master was is not consistent with who the Master truly is. The third servant made his experience mean something of a half-truth. Based on the meaning of his experience the third servant made a decision about how he would show up in his relationships with his boss. He developed habits that shaped and developed a false sense of who the Master was due to his own **fear**.

Often that is what we do in life. We hold onto a false belief because we give meaning to certain situations with a skewed perspective.

Whatever joy the master might have experienced because of the first two servants vanishes.

IF and this is a big IF, if indeed the master was the kind of person the third servant described by insulting and describing the master of being a hard man, demanding and making no allowance for human error,

Then... why didn't this third servant simply deposit the money in the bank? That was an option, a safe option.

When one becomes paralyzed with fear, it is hard to think clearly.

Notice there wasn't any conversation between the three servants on investment strategies.

But Jesus says in v. 25 it was all because of fear.

John the beloved disciple wanted us to know this about fear...

"...perfect **love** casts out fear." (1 John 4:18)

There is a lot of confusion upon the return of the master, along with the final words of casting into the utter darkness. I know I found this statement really confusing too.

I discovered a verse in Isaiah which Jesus would have known, that helped clarify for me.

I will give you the treasures of darkness
and riches hidden in secret places,
so that you may know that it is I,
the LORD, the God of Israel,
who call you by your name.

Isaiah 45:3

Just because the servant was casted into utter darkness doesn't mean he stayed there.

What seemed hopeless for me for the third servant, after reading this Hebrew Scripture, I have a renewed hope.

There are some things that happen in darkness that **must** happen.

What happens to seeds for them to grow?

They must sink down into the darkness of the earth.

What about us? Where are babies formed?

They are formed in the darkness of the womb.

Then most of all, we benefitted from an especially dark place:

After Christ died for us, our sins, our selfishness, he was placed in a dark tomb for three days. Because of that darkness and His resurrection, we are able to experience new life. By taking a risk and placing our faith in Jesus, we get to have a relationship with God- who calls us by name. What kind of risks do you want to take?