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Proper 28A - November 19, 2017

This Gospel is the last in a series of unsettling parables Jesus shared with his followers after coming into Jerusalem intended to describe the Kingdom of Heaven. The one from last week about the foolish bridesmaids, is similar to this week's parable because it depicts winners and losers. Today's story depicts good and trustworthy slaves, who know what to do with the absentee landlord's wealth and are the winners; and, a foolish slave, who, misunderstanding his role and the master's expectation, hides the money and is the loser.

What are we to gain from this story? Well, certainly, on the surface, it's about wealth. Jesus spoke more about wealth than about any other subject. But, wealth is only the surface topic, and this parable, just like others, is about much more than wealth. However, for today's sermon, I'd like to focus on Stewardship in its broadest sense, not just material wealth. Now, I know that word makes us all immediately think of money and pledges. But, I'm not talking about money, at least not specifically.

"All things come of you, Lord. And of your own have we given you." We say this every Sunday when we offer the gifts; and I wonder sometimes, if we really get that. The world, and all that is in it, **does** belong to God. And it's not just the material aspects of the world - land, air, and water; and, not just what we produce out of those resources - the wealth that comes from our industry. **We** also are God's. Each of us with our own unique interests, ways of thinking and working, all come through the Creator and for the Creator. In today's Gospel, God's wealth is portrayed as "talents." Originally a talent was a unit of measure, roughly equaling the amount of water it took to fill a Greek amphora, about 100 pounds. It was a way to measure wealth. But over time meaning of the word in English included all God's gifts- certainly money, but also skills, intelligence, aptitude. God entrusts us with these gifts at birth, with the expectation that we will use them to God's glory. We're not forced of course. We can choose to live our lives as if they

have nothing to do God, and that all our success and productivity comes from our own efforts. We might all know people who live that way, and I think we can all see a bit of ourselves in that attitude - living disconnected, as if what we do with our talents has nothing to do with God or others.

But deep down I think we all know that's not true. And when we pause and truly reflect on the reality that we belong to God and all we have comes from God, it can bring a sense of relief, a sort of freedom. Not only are we freed from believing that all that we have is ours to do with as we please, but it should also free us from fear of failure. And, in that freedom we find the joy that comes from fully realizing our blessings, and being the expression God's infinite love in the world. See, we aren't fully able to grasp how blessed and loved we are by God, until we give it away.

I believe the trustworthy slaves understood this. They knew the fullness of their joy was in the sharing of their master's joy. They knew the talents were only entrusted to them, and they also knew that they were free to take the risk of investing these talents, that they might bring profit for the master. The foolish slave lived in fear. While he knew the talents were not his; he misunderstood the nature of the master and the master's expectation. Remember, he said he knew the master to be a harsh man. Frozen in fear of upsetting the master, he conserved the talents. While trying to save his own hide, he ensured that the master would not benefit. But, the trustworthy slaves, freed from the fear of making a mistake, brought the master great benefit, and were given more to invest.

If God calls us to use our individual gifts to God's benefit, what is God's benefit? What profit does God expect? The prophet Isaiah tells us, in this familiar lesson from Lent, "...to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke...to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house;" And Micah puts it this way, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

These commands from God are not unfamiliar to our ears, and Jesus reiterated them throughout his ministry. God wants us to be his love in the world; and we do that by selflessly, fearlessly, and extravagantly living the fullness of the lives we were given.

So, all we have, all that we have made of ourselves, all that we are - belong to God. And, God expects us to use what we are given to do God's work in the world - to love one another, and to help the most vulnerable. But, I believe today's Gospel goes farther than that. It seems that God expects us not just to use our gifts, but to risk them. To take the little we have and use it with the expectation that they will somehow be multiplied. There are many examples in scripture that show great blessings coming from humble things - Moses' staff aiding the miracles of the Exodus, the rock slung by David to bring down Goliath, the humble maiden Mary, at the Annunciation, declaring, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Moses, David, and Mary all trusted that God would use their humble gifts to bring great things to pass. One of the questions that I had when reading this Gospel passage was, why didn't the trustworthy slaves fear the Master, as the foolish one did? Why did they take a risk? I've come to believe it was because they must have had the experience of knowing the Master fully, and that they knew he trusted them and wanted them to succeed. I also like to think that there was a fourth slave - the one who invested and lost it all? What would the master's response be to that slave? From everything Jesus left us to understand the nature of God's heavenly kingdom, I believe the master would have told the slave who invested and lost, "Well, I'm glad you gave it your best. Now, here's another two talents; give it another try." Because, God is extravagant in his giving, and trusts us enough to endow us with free will.

It's not a great burden to live our faith boldly, to give generously of the talents God has given. It's actually a joyous experience. When we invest ourselves fully in life, God certainly benefits, but we benefit too. In Malachi, God all but dares us, saying "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of

heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” When we trust our instincts, and fully use our talents, in the broadest sense of the word, it is a joy to us, and a joy to God. St. Irenaeus puts it perfectly - the glory of God is a human fully alive.

Someone once sent me one of those often-forwarded emails that are meant to be uplifting. While I usually delete these emails, for some reason, I read this one, and it touched me. The email stated, “Work like you don’t need the money. Dance like nobody’s watching, and love like you’ve never been hurt.” These kinds of messages touch us, and why, because we know in our hearts that that is how God wants us to live. Living the God life, is risky business, and it’s our greatest joy. Those who live safely and cautiously, like the foolish slave, may be safe in the short run, but it brings no benefit, no fulfillment. Even what they have is taken away, as the parable states. Living life on the wild side...that’s where the rewards are. So, why don’t we live like that? Why do we often play it safe and live like the foolish slave?

Well, you’ve heard me say it before, and I’ll say it again. It’s fear. Fear impedes us from living fully. Fear - that great weapon of the Evil One - deludes us into thinking that God is the harsh master the foolish slave perceived him to be. Fear keeps us locked in lives of complacency and self-doubt. Life lived in fear only finds its fulfillment in discontent, blame, resentment, and cynicism. It is from this place of fear that come the questions that must have been going through the foolish slave’s mind, What if I fail? What will people think? What if they criticize me?

Well, what if we fail. Have we not been reminded again and again that God has our backs? If God is for us who can be against us? says Paul. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” And in today’s epistle, “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day... For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation ... Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” We have nothing to fear.

Today's good news reminds us of that all there is belongs to God and that God expects us to use it creatively to our good and to God's Glory. There is great power that comes from the joy of receiving our life as a gift, and from the confidence of being loved by God. Let us pray the words of St. Ignatius who joyously offered his life to God's glory

Lord, I freely yield all my freedom to you.
Take my memory, my intellect and my entire will.
You have given me anything I am or have;
I give it all back to you;
to stand under your will alone.
Your love and your grace are enough for me;
I shall ask for nothing more. Amen.