

We opened today's service with one of my favorite Collects. We are to *hear* Scripture. We are to *read* Scripture. We are to *mark* Scripture. We are to *learn* Scripture. We are to *inwardly digest* Scripture. Inwardly digest....what a great image. We are not talking about rolling up the manuscript and munching on it for brunch. Imagine what it means to understand Scripture so well that it becomes an innate part of us. A part of our very being, much like the food we eat that nourishes us, strengthens us, allows us to act and be and live and love. Much like the meal we are about to celebrate and gather around at *this* Eucharistic table.

All of our Scriptural readings assigned to our opening prayer are all focused on the concept of judgment tied to right action. Here we are on Veteran's Day weekend and on the very precipice of Advent (a time of hopeful waiting and reflection) and we are asked to consider right action based on our living out God's word. In our Judges reading, in 1 Thessalonians, the focus is on living into God's instructions. In Matthew, we have the familiar parable of the 5-2-1 talents: talents being a metaphor for gifts and how those gifts are utilized.

How do we inwardly digest this parable? One of the challenges is how we define, how we understand the word "talents". We can easily lose the "wow" factor of what Jesus is saying here: a talent in the first century was not a coin, or a bag of coins, but a unit of weight. And one talent of silver was roughly equivalent to 15 to 20 years of labor for the average worker. To gain the wow factor, all we have to do is multiply our annual income by 20, and that is one talent. If we multiply that figure by 5 we can understand the magnitude of the gift to the first servant (that is 75 to 100 years of current yearly income). To concretize that: say we make \$50K/year. One talent = \$750K to \$1M. Five talents = \$3.75M to \$5M. And the individuals with the two and five talents doubled those amounts. We need to take note that the "master" who gave these gifts considered them "little", "a few things", basically inconsequential. And the rewards to these two was to be given "many" tasks and assignments, more responsibility.

And yet, with that positive outcome, so much of our Gospel account (and commentary about this Gospel) is focused on the servant who took the 1 talent, the 15 to 20 years of earnings, and buried that talent, so it could be returned, unchanged, to the master who gave it. On whom should our focus be placed: the first two or the last?

We need to explore who this last individual represents in order to juxtapose that character against the other two in the story. We are at the end of Matthew's Gospel, and Jesus is done arguing with the scribes and the Pharisees. This individual who only protected the gift given is synonymous to the scribes and the Pharisees. Their existence was to protect, and keep unchanged, preserve unsullied the law as it was handed down to them. Any change, any attempt at modification would have been thought a sacrilege and a defilement. Their job was to keep things exactly as they are: for why change something when it has worked fine for all these years?

Jesus is saying that this kind of paralysis cripples us to do God's work in the world. The theologian William Barclay said "there can be no religion without some adventure" mixed into the equation. What Jesus is pointing us to explore and accept is that all of us have different abilities, different talents and that none of us are equal. But that basic inequality *does not matter*. What matters is the effort. The first two parties in our story today were of different abilities, one given more than

twice the other, and yet they both doubled what had been given, and were given more after. Whatever gifts and abilities we have, whether financial, mental, physical or whatever, they must be fully utilized for the creation of this kingdom, for these gifts are precious, to us, to our community, to the world, to God. This is a universal-life-lesson Jesus is teaching: use it or lose it. And he is taking that adage and making it his own, God's own, our own.

Today's Gospel is truly asking us to not read these texts literally, but metaphorically, symbolically, allegorically. We are all asked to think about what would be a metaphor for, symbol of, or allegory for this Gospel in our life today. What in our lives have we taken and held and about which we have fought against any change? This is one of the ironies of church-land. All of us, at some level, want the familiarity, the comfort, the knowledge that when we walk into church, everything will be the same. No one will have moved anything. This is a common church-land phenomenon: don't change anything..... And when we act this way, Jesus is clearly saying we are that individual who buried the one talent.

The tension here is obvious: our desire for comfort and sameness in church intertwined with our following Jesus, the most radical change-maker in history. Where are we going to fall on that spectrum? The writer, spiritual retreat leader, Episcopal priest, Barbara Crafton has recently said: "So grow while you can. Risk whenever you can. Be bold, even when you are trembling with fear. Commit to growing, for if you do not, you will surely shrink, you will surely die with only the one talent given you.."

Our Gospel is calling us to not be nay-sayers, to not be fearful, to be instead *the* willing change-agent, to expect and accept growth and change, *and* to not fear change. This is not change for change's sake, but change based on theological and ecclesiastic principles necessary to ferment growth. This is not to denigrate, abuse, criticize what has gone before. We would not be here today but for what went on before. And yet, that does not mean everything must be frozen in time..... The hard truth is we are not growing and we must find a way to do so.

We are not suggesting, advocating or demanding the abrogation of all that has gone before....examining, evaluating and supplementing when and where necessary is the direction in which we are heading....All of this in an effort to spur on growth.....And with growth comes change. Change in the form of new people....people we do not know who represent change. This can be scary, off-putting but also exciting and exhilarating..... Our Gospel is calling us to be imaginative in the use of our gifts, creative in dreaming how to further the creation of kingdom Christ opened for all of us, and strongly passionate in fully using the talents given to us for the furtherance of this piece of the kingdom we have been entrusted with for a time....to make it grow and thrive and joyfully embrace the resultant change.

Let us pray: Blessed and loving God, so instill in us the knowledge of your love that we may know how to hear your will for us, read the direction we should take, mark the opportunities to follow, learn how wondrous and joyous our labors can be, and inwardly digest your Scriptures, thereby giving us the nourishment to persevere and use our talents for the furtherance of your kingdom, endeavoring to always assist in its growth and to willingly live into the adventure of change and growth; all this we ask in your Son's name, Jesus Christ, the firstborn of all creation, the head of the church, the chief historic change-agent, and the author of our salvation. Amen.

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