

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31
<i>Response</i>	Blessed are those who fear the Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 128:1-2, 3, 4-5
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Thessalonians 5:1-6
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Remain in me as I remain in you, says the Lord. Whoever remains in me bears much fruit.
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 25:14-30

The 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us to one of our final parables from the Gospel of Matthew. It's the famous parable of the talents, and it is in Matthew chapter 25, in the middle Jesus' final discourse, verses 14-30. It is kind of a long parable but it's a really important one, so let's begin. We will read it through, and then I will ask some questions about it, and I will try to unpack the meaning. Jesus is of course comparing the kingdom of God to different realities and he says this in verse 14:

For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.' He

also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.'¹

That is a rough parable. There is a lot going on there, a lot of twists and turns so let us just walk through it step-by-step. The first question I want to ask here is what exactly was a talent? What is the situation being described here and what was the unit of measure being described? So Jesus sets up a situation. The context here is of a master with his servants. The master goes off into a foreign country and he leaves the servants his money in order for them to make investments with the money. Now the unit of money being described here, a talent, was in fact a large amount of money. We don't know exactly how much because the unit would differ on whether it was a silver talent or a gold talent, that would be that the most valuable of all; but just as an example, scholars point out that one silver talent was about 15 to 20 years worth of daily wages. So that's a whole lot of money even if you only get one talent.

In this case the master leaves five to one servant, two to another servant, and then one to a third servant. And it's interesting here, you will notice in that line it says that he gave the talents each according to his ability. That is your first little clue here that something more is going on in this parable than just a straightforward story about investing money. That what we are talking about here is Jesus, or God, being like the master, who is then bestowing gifts upon us, his servants, but not

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

equally. He is not equally distributing them. This is important. The talents are not given equally, but each person according to their ability. This, by the way, is where we get the actual word talent from in English. So when we talk about someone being talented, we are using an ancient Jewish or Greco-Roman monetary unit in order to talk about someone's innate gifts, that one person is more talented than another person at music. Why? Well because they have a natural gift to do a better job, to be a better musician, than someone else. Someone else might be more talented at math than me — that is not hard because I am terrible at math — because they have a natural innate ability to solve math problems and to do it well. So the English word talent comes from this parable. That is very significant here.

So the master is giving each of these different distributions of money to the servants on the assumption that while he's away they are going to use them well, they will invest them, and then he'll get the return when he returns at the end. So what happens? The master comes back after a long time, verse 19, to settle accounts with the servants. And you can see here that the first servant has double his investment, so what does the master say to him? “Well done...enter into the joy of your master.” Now there is another clue that this is not just a story about investments. This is about the kingdom of God. Just like the entering into the wedding feast in the parable of the 10 virgins was a metaphor, was a figure for entering into the eternal wedding feast of the kingdom of Heaven, so too this idea of entering into the joy of the master is a figure for entering into the joy of the kingdom. I think that is something worth dwelling on, to think about, to ponder. That one of the essential aspects of heaven is not just eternal life, which is great, eternal life is great, but think about being joyful for all eternity. Especially in our day and time when so many people battle with anxiety and depression, sadness and fear of pain and hurt, think about moments in your life where you had joy -- like real joy -- and then multiply that times infinity and eternity. That is what the kingdom of heaven is like, and that's what the master is inviting the servants into. The master is God and he says “come into the joy of the master.”

Now that's the first two servants though, the third servant does not do the same. So the first servant doubles his investment, the second servant doubles his investment, but then the third servant reacts differently. Look at how he reacts, this is interesting. When the master comes to settle the account, it says “I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not

winnow.” Pause there. I don’t know if you notice this, but he just insulted the master. He basically called him a thief, because when you reap where you didn't sow that means you take what belongs to someone else. So if you sow your field and then you go reap your field, you're taking the fruits of what belongs to you. But if you reap what you didn't sow, you're basically stealing from someone else. So what is this servant's concept of his master? He thinks of his master as a hard man, in other words someone who is unforgiving, who is selfish, and also as a kind of a thief who steals from people. So his response to the master is fear. He doesn't trust the master. He doesn't want to give joy to the master by making an investment with the master's money, in his fear he takes that one talent and buries it in the ground. Why? So that he can just give the master back what belongs to him. His security is in just giving him what belongs to him anyway.

This is a twist. This is one of those twists that Jesus' parables have. Why would anyone do this? It really is an irrational act. If the master is so generous to give you freely one talent, which would be about 15 to 20 years worth of wages, so I am going to try to do some math here and I shouldn't do this, but if it is 20 years worth of wages, let's say it is like \$50,000 a year, what would that be? Can you tell me? It is like a million dollars. So if an annual salary would be around \$50,000 a year and the master gives him a talent, it's worth 20 years of wages. He just gave you \$1 million. If someone gives you \$1 million, that should be a clue to you that they are generous, that they're not the kind of person who is a hard man, who is very selfish with what belongs to them. Much less if he gives someone five talents, like \$5 million to do with as you will, to invest as you will, to use as you will. So the servant here has a twisted vision of the master. He doesn't understand who the master is. Not only does he not recognize that the master is generous, he even thinks the master is a thief, that he takes what doesn't belong to him.

I think this is really telling, because one of the things it shows us is how sin distorts our understanding of God. It actually makes me think of Genesis 2. If you remember, after Adam and Eve fall, what do they do? They are afraid of God and they go and they hide from God because their understanding of God is not as a generous father who wants to give them everything, who gave them life and gives them dominion over the whole world, but their idea of God after they sin is altered. They think of him as a tyrant, as someone who is out to get them, who wants to withhold good things from them, of someone of whom they should be afraid.

That's how the third servant thinks of his master. He's fearful, he's anxious and he's irrationally depicting the master as selfish, and as a thief. Which by the way, can God be a thief? No. Everything that exists is from him. It all belongs to him. So even when we give him something, we are simply giving back to him what was his to begin with. Every gift that we have is ultimately from him anyway. So in this case, this servant here fails to invest the master's money and the master responds with these words, he is really harsh: "You wicked and slothful servant...you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest."

So pause here and notice that key word slothful. What is the main sin of the third servant? It's that he's spiritually slothful. He's lazy, in other words. He has the gift, he has the talent, he has the money and he just doesn't do anything with it. He's afraid and he is lazy. Notice then what is not said about the servant. It doesn't say you adulterer. He doesn't say you thief. He doesn't say you murderer. This is not a sin of commission. This is what theologians call a sin of omission. It's not what he did, it's what he failed to do with the gift that God had given him, with the talent the master had given him. So the master says "take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents." Now this is again strange. You are going to take the \$1 million away from this guy and give it to the guy who already has 5 million? That doesn't make any sense. But Jesus explains it to us at the end here. Obviously he is not talking about actual money, he is talking about spiritual gifts. And so at the end of the parable Jesus gives us what I've referred to before as the *nimshal*. The *nimshal* is either a short or a long explanation of the Jewish parable that kind of drives home the main point of the parable. So what's the main point here? "To every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." And then he says "cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." That last line is your cue, that's the kind of key to unlocking the fact that this isn't about finances. The outer darkness in all of Jesus' parables is always a figure for Hell. It's a figure for being separated from God for all eternity. Jesus always uses the image of weeping and gnashing of teeth as a way of describing the agony, the pain and the suffering of being separated from God for all eternity. So what is being described here, essentially the *nimshal*, the main point of this parable, is that sins of omission have consequences. Spiritual sloth, in other words, failing to take the gifts that God has given you, and to actually utilize them, to

invest them, to bear fruit, to multiply them, is itself a sin. It's a sin of spiritual sloth.

We know this as Catholics because our spiritual tradition talks about the seven deadly sins. Most of us are familiar with the sin of lust, or even maybe the sin of greed, or pride, or anger; but one of the sins that is very pervasive in our culture and in our time, but which we often overlook and don't think about as much, is the seventh deadly sin, the sin of sloth. The sin of laziness, of failing to act when we should act. And of spiritual laziness in particular, which would be failing to utilize the spiritual gifts that God has given us and to put them into practice so that they might bear fruit, to invest them so to speak. That's a really serious omission, that is a serious sin, and Jesus here is using this parable to exhort his followers, to exhort his disciples to be diligent. What is the opposite virtue? The vice is sloth. What's the virtue? Diligence. Hard work, not just in the earthly realm but in the spiritual realm. Doing the hard work of bearing fruit with the gifts that God has given us, investing them. And I think, although I can't be sure, I think that emphasis on the virtue of diligence is the link between the New Testament reading for today and the Old Testament reading.

If you go back, the Old Testament reading for today is from the book of Proverbs 31. This is a very famous passage. You may have seen books on the Proverbs 31 woman. It's a long description at the end of the book of Proverbs of a virtuous wife. And in this case, when I was preparing for the video I was like what exactly is the link between the Old and New Testament? It's really hard to see. This one is not as obvious as a lot of the other Old Testament passages we've been looking at. But as far as I can tell, the one connection I can see is this virtue of diligence, because in Proverbs 31 there is this description of a virtuous wife, and one of her characteristics is that she's hard-working, is that she's diligent. So let me read this very famous description and we will look at the virtuous wife. In this instance, I just want to make a note that the chapter of Proverbs 31 is a lot longer than the lectionary reading. The lectionary reading is a sample, it just chooses a few verses. I encourage you to go back and read the whole thing, but I am just going to focus on the verses that the lectionary gives us. This is what Proverbs 31 says:

A good wife who can find?
She is far more precious than jewels.

The heart of her husband trusts in her,
and he will have no lack of gain.
She does him good, and not harm,
all the days of her life.
She seeks wool and flax,
and works with willing hands.

She puts her hands to the distaff,
and her hands hold the spindle.
She opens her hand to the poor,
and reaches out her hands to the needy.

Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands,
and let her works praise her in the gates.

That is a beautiful passage. What is being described here? If you look at the text it kind of highlights several different virtues and you can single them out by looking at the various images used to describe the Proverbs 31 woman or the words involved. So the first word, the kind of lead term here is the Hebrew word *hayil*. *Hayil* means strong or capable. The Revised Standard Version translates this, it is a little misleading, when it says “a good wife who can find?” The normal Hebrew word for good is *tov*, but that is not the word being used here. *Hayil* is different, it means a capable wife, a strong wife. The word can even be used in the context of valiant in certain cases here. So she's strong, she's capable. That is the first virtue. The second virtue described is that she is faithful to her husband. Notice what it says, “the heart of her husband trusts in her.” So she is faithful to him and he can put her trust in her, and in her strength. Third, she is a loving wife. Notice what it says, “she does her husband good and not harm all the days of her life.” So by definition, to love someone is to will the good of another person, well the Proverbs 31 wife is a loving wife. She doesn't will harm to her husband, she wills him good, and she does it over and over and over again all the days of his life.

The next characteristic is really important, it's the one that links with the parable, that she is diligent. In other words, she's hard-working. That's really what you're

getting in the description of her when it says that she “seeks wool and flax”, she “works with willing hands”, she “puts her hand to the distaff”, in other words she's not idle. And this is a very important point. In ancient Israel, women worked very, very hard. They worked primarily in the domestic sphere, but that didn't mean that they didn't have an important economic role. You can actually see this here that she seeks wool and flax, so what is she doing? She's sewing, she's making clothing, she's making garments, she's putting her hand to the spindle, and she is working in the home diligently. She's not idle. So that is a very important virtue that you see being described here in the Proverbs 31 woman, diligence, she is hard-working.

Another virtue, the fifth one here, is generosity. So notice, not only does the wife here make money for the home, but she also takes those earnings and she opens her hands to the poor. She's generous with the wealth that she has acquired. And then finally, but by no means least important, she has the virtue of interior beauty. This is really important. The text ends by saying charm is deceitful and beauty is vain. In other words, exterior charm, exterior beauty, those are good things but they're passing, right. That is what the word vain means. They are ephemeral, they are fleeting, they don't last forever. No matter how beautiful you are, eventually age will take that outward beauty away. But the Proverbs 31 woman is inwardly beautiful because she fears the Lord, that's where true beauty is. It's in her piety, it's in her obedience to God, and in that beauty age doesn't take it away, it actually should increase that. She should become more beautiful as she grows in virtue, as she grows in wisdom and knowledge and in fear of the Lord, and for this we see something very interesting, it ends by saying “let her works praise her in the city gates.”

What does that mean? Well on the one hand it means that she has a reputation for virtue, that her virtue isn't private. It isn't hidden virtue. It's something that's known by the public, it is known by the people, the image here is of the city gates. But I think there is something even more specific here, because earlier in the passage -- this isn't in the lectionary but it is in Proverbs 31 -- it says “her husband is known in the gates when he sits among the elders of the land”, because the elders of the people in ancient Judaism would gather at the city gates to deliberate, to make decisions for the people, for the town. So when it says “her works praise her in the city gates,” some people have suggested what that means is that her

husband praises her in the city gates. In other words, he speaks well of his wife in public. I think that's a really important piece of wisdom from the Old Testament. Within a marriage, not only should the wife love her husband and do good to her husband all the days of her life, the husband should always speak well of his wife in public. He should never denigrate her or speak badly about her in front of other people. He should always find her virtues and praise her virtues in the city gates. This is a beautiful image for this loving relationship between the husband and the valiant wife, the capable wife, the one who is far more precious than jewels.

And you can see this theme of the happiness of the home and of the marriage in Psalm 128, which is the Responsorial Psalm. So if you turn over to the Responsorial Psalm for today, it is the famous Psalm about the family that praises the Lord and that is blessed in following the Lord. You might know the Psalm, but I will read it again anyway. It says:

Blessed is every one who fears the LORD,
who walks in his ways!
You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you.
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.
Lo, thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.
The LORD bless you from Zion!
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life!

So once again you see the image here of a home in which the husband and the wife are obedient to God, and because they are obedient to God, because they fear the Lord, they are blessed. The image here is of the wife as a fruitful vine in the house, but also the children as olive shoots, which is a really cool image. I just recently learned this, from what I understand, an olive tree grows very, very, very slowly. That's why they can live to be centuries old, they can be hundreds of years old. But part of the side effect of that slow growth is that they don't bear a crop for

decades. I should have looked this up before I said it publicly, but I will say it anyway. What I was told was that an olive tree can take 20-30 years before it bears a full crop of olives. So think about the foresight and the patience that you have to have in order to invest in an olive orchard, where you might plant the trees and not see the fruits for decades. Well that's what your children are like. They are like olive shoots around the table. They're just getting started, they're just getting planted, and you might not see the fruit of your labor, of your investment, of your time with your children, until 30 or 40 years go by, until they are adults. But if you're faithful and you are obedient to God, and follow the Lord and his ways, like the family in Psalm 128, then you too will reap the fruits of that investment in your wife and in your children, or in your spouse and in your families. So this is a really beautiful Psalm that the Church is putting before us this day. So I think with that we can see it's not as clear of a connection, but at the very least the Church has given us two really important teachings, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament, about the virtue of diligence, the virtue of hard work, the virtue of investing the gifts that the Lord has given us day in and day out.

I will close here with a quote from St. John Chrysostom, which is not about the Proverbs 31 woman or the Psalm 128 family, but about the parable of the talents.

“You should have deposited the money,” he says, “and left me to reclaim it, which I should have done with interest,” meaning by interest the good works that are seen to follow the hearing of the Lord. “The easier part is all you were expected to do, leaving the harder part to me.”... What is the meaning of this? That whoever has received for the good of others the ability to preach and teach, and does not use it, will lose that ability, whereas the zealous servant will be given greater ability, even as the other forfeits what he had.

Fascinating insights. So what St. John Chrysostom is saying there is that in the spiritual realm we all receive spiritual gifts, and if we fail to invest those gifts and utilize them, not only will we commit the sin of sloth and omission, but those gifts will be taken away from us and given to someone who will invest them and who will utilize. That is kind of a tough but a difficult truth about the spiritual life. So one thing I would say about this particular parable and the readings for this week, which are very rich for the moral and spiritual life, is to ask yourself what are my

talents? What gifts, what spiritual gifts has God given me and what am I doing with them? How have I invested them? Am I diligent about cultivating the spiritual gifts that God has given me? Whether it's the gift of teaching or the gift of preaching or the gift of service or the gift of generosity, whatever spiritual gift God has given you (discern the spirits, there are all kinds, they are listed in 1 Corinthians 12), discern what are my gifts? And what am I doing with them? That is really what Jesus is confronting us with in this parable. And for those of us who are married, we can look in a special way at Proverbs 31 and ask ourselves, do we cultivate the virtues that we see listed there: fidelity, love, diligence, generosity to the poor? Am I taking my monetary gifts and giving them to those in need? That is an essential part of the spiritual life, almsgiving, giving our possessions, some of what we have, to those who are less fortunate than we are, giving our gifts away so that we can cultivate that interior beauty of the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of Wisdom.