

**All Saint's, Parma, November 16, 2008, Proper 28, Year A**

Today's gospel consists of a parable that does not have an obvious point like those more familiar stories like the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the Parable of the Prodigal Son. On the surface the story seems to be about investing money and the various returns from such investments. But as we shall see, it really isn't about this at all.

A king was leaving on a long journey and he entrusted his property with his servants. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to a third he gave one talent. The king had entrusted much to his servants. A talent was worth an incredible amount of money: It would take a laborer 15 years of work to earn one talent. Then after a long time the king returned to settle his accounts with his servants. And what did he find? The first servant had doubled his five talents to ten. The second servant had doubled his two talents to four. But the last servant had buried his talent in the ground. This aroused the anger of the king and he called that servant wicked and lazy, for he had not used his talent productively. As a result the talent he had was taken away from him and given to the servant who had doubled the five talents.

For Matthew, the king that went away on a long journey represents Jesus who has left this world after the resurrection. The servants are you me, the Christians who have been left behind. The talents represent everything God has given us. In fact the word talent comes from this very parable. However, we are talking about much more than a natural ability we may have, such as athletic ability. It refers to everything God has given us, all that we are and all that we have. The returning king is Jesus at his second coming when we will be asked how we have used for God all that God has given us.

The task at first may seem impossible. After all, in today's economy, how many of us could double our money as the first two servants did? Actually the servants weren't being asked the impossible. Interest rates in the ancient world were very high. But what are we to make of the third servant who buried his money? That seems to be a very stupid thing to do. But from the point of view of the third servant, what he did made perfect sense. Rabbinical law stated that burying valuables was the best security against theft. By burying the talent, the servant had no liability for loss. This is the reason we have so many ancient coins. Archeologists are always digging them up where they were buried in ancient times by people like the third servant.

The third servant was not a bad person. There was no hint of fraud or deceit with him. He had no plans to embezzle the funds or to swindle his master. So what was the problem? That servant was risk-averse. It was more important for him to preserve his safety and security than to take a risk in investing the money. He was like a 27 year-old co-worker of mine, who in reaction to the free fall of the stock market panicked, and took all of her money invested in stocks for retirement and put them into low-interest CDs. She did this while 40 years away for retirement! I told her there was plenty of time for the stock market to recover, and return an average of 10 per cent in the long run. I think she got my point.

What the parable does is compare the use of all that God has given us for use in God's service with the use of a financial loan to make a profit for the investor. What God has given us-our selves, or lives, our faith, our abilities, our gifts, our possessions-is given in order to be spent and put into circulation. Our lives are to be expended in God's service, becoming the source of further blessings for others and for ourselves. All that God gives us is given to be risked in new ventures in God's service. Every new step in living for God is a risk. But if we stand still, paralyzed like the third servant with fear of failure, cling for safety to what we already are and have, we will in fact lose what we have. And every successful risk leads to being entrusted with more, again to be expended and risked.

We have many great saints of the church that illustrate this point. Mother Theresa is a great example of someone who took risks for God. In 1946 Mother Teresa experienced what she later described as "the call within the call" while traveling to her convent in India for her annual retreat. She later said, "I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. It was an order. To fail would have been to break the faith." She began her missionary work with the poor in 1948, adopted Indian citizenship, and ventured out into the slums. Mother Teresa wrote in her diary that her first year was fraught with difficulties. She had no income and had to resort to begging for food and supplies. She experienced doubt, loneliness and the temptation to return to the comfort of convent life during these early months. However, at the time of her death in 1997, Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity had over 4,000 sisters, an associated brotherhood of 300 members, and over 100,000 lay volunteers, operating 610 missions in 123 countries. These included hospices and homes for people with HIV/AIDS, leprosy and tuberculosis, soup kitchens, children's and family counseling programs, orphanages, and schools. Here was someone who took risks for God and received a return so large it can hardly be calculated.

This past Friday the president of Cuttington University, the oldest African institution of higher learning in west Africa, addressed our Diocesan Convention. This university has been associated with the Episcopal Church since its beginning in 1889. Prior to the First Liberian Civil War, which began in 1989, 45% of government officials were alumni of the college. During the First Liberian Civil War from 1989 to 1996 the school was looted and the structures were damaged and the campus used as a training facility for militias. A second Liberian Civil war began in 1999 and didn't end until 2003. From the utter disaster of these two wars in a failed state it seemed impossible the school would ever reopen. Yet in 1998, Cuttington University re-opened with a class of 103 students. The continuing civil war affected the students, and at one point a group of them burned down the student center. In spite of this the Anglican priest who is president of the university persisted. He took risk after risk to get the school on its feet once again, and today, although the needs of the university remain great, it has 2000 students.

Mother Teresa and the president of Cuttington University were like the first two servants. Like them, they got more responsibility. "You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things," says the King. For Mother Theresa it was her many ministries. For the university president it was a functioning and larger university. For the two servants in the gospel story, the reward for taking the risk and managing the investment was the burden of greater risk and the challenge of larger investments. But with the responsibility came a second reward: the joy of the master's presence. "Enter the joy of your master," the two servants are told. The Good News Bible translates the phrase: "Come on in and share my happiness."

The third servant, however, loses two things: the responsibility of being a good steward of the gifts God had given him, and secondly, the joy of his master's presence. So the message for us is clear. We are not to be paralyzed by fear like the first servant. We are to risk discovering a God ready to share the delight of his presence and participation in his mission.