

Pentecost 27

November 16, 2008

The Rev. Canon David W. Lovelace

I can think of no one more respected in our culture than a successful entrepreneur. They are the heroes of capitalism and the business world. An entrepreneur starts out with a good idea, works hard and takes risks to convert that idea into a profitable success. People like Andrew Carnegie, Henry Ford, Thomas Edison in an earlier time come to mind. Bill Gates, Ted Turner, Oprah Winfrey in our own day are examples of successful entrepreneurs. They are people with brains and talent. They may not have started with lots of money but they took what they had and built an incredible business.

Jesus tells a story about entrepreneurs in the Gospel this morning. It is a story that we know as the parable of the talents. Even people who do not read the Bible know this story. It is a story that has become embedded in our culture.

Obviously a very rich man went on a journey. He gives three of his most trusted slaves money to invest on his behalf. According to the story, he gave one slave five talents, one slave two talents and one slave one talent. A talent is a measure of weight. So, the man gave his slaves silver, bronze or gold to hold as stewards until the day in which he returned. To get some idea of what we are talking about in this story, a talent of silver was worth about sixteen year's wages. That is a lot of money. So the rich man gave his slaves some serious money to be responsible for until the time when he returned.

The first two slaves invested and traded with the talents given to them. It is obvious the futures market in Jerusalem at the time was in a growing phase, so they doubled their investment. The third slave was more conservative. He had listened to the rabbis say it was prudent to bury money in the ground rather than risk losing it. He knew his master was a shrewd business man reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he had not scattered. He was afraid to take something that was not his and risk losing it. So, he dug a hole and buried the talent.

I cannot hear this parable at this particular time without thinking about the stock market and the current economic downturn. We in this parish have been blessed with an endowment. In fact on this very day we are going at the end of our service to pause and give thanks to God for those persons who have provided a remembrance of the parish in their estate planning. We are going to unveil a plaque in the narthex that names the 1755 Society of persons who have planted a tree under which they will never sit but will provide for future generations to gather in the name of this parish to explore their faith.

When this endowment fund was first invested we were like the first two slaves. We watched the endowment grow and increase providing opportunities for us to expand our ministries. With the decline in the stock market our endowment has lost a talent or two and we are wondering if we might not have been smarter to act like the one talent slave who buried the money. That way we would have at least out performed the market. If the master comes today, we face the problem of having fewer talents than we did a year ago.

The problem of the talents raises the issue of what really matters. Conversations about the endowment fund revolve around how to preserve the principal and still have money for ministry. How much can we afford to withdraw 5 %, 8%, 10% before we risk using all that has been committed to our care? Parish leaders are concerned that giving to the parish has decline in the past few years while expenses have gone up. We have used income and some principal from the endowment to fund our operation and ministries. Your leaders want to make sure there is a tree for future generations to enjoy as we today enjoy our participation at St. John.

Jesus calls us to something more than preservation. All three slaves received talents that did not belong to them, money that was given not earned. The gift of the talents was an act of generosity, a bequest from their master, an indication of trust.

When the master returned from his journey he asked his three slaves to account for the money that had been entrusted to their care while he was away. The first two - the five talent and two talent man - had doubled their money. Obviously they had to take some risks. The master praised them and rewarded them by telling them to keep the money - both the principal and the profit.

The one talent man did not make even a shekel for his master. He was afraid of his master and unwilling to take a chance. So, he just dug a hole and put the money in the ground. He did not understand what he had been given. Perhaps he hoped his

master would feel sorry for him and let him keep the money. But that was not the case, in the end he had nothing at all.

So, did Jesus tell this story to encourage investors to take risks? Did he tell this story to remind us to stop worrying about preserving the principal of the endowment funds? I don't think he was addressing first century estate planners or financial advisors. I think Jesus was making another point.

Let me put it this way, I think Jesus was looking for spiritual entrepreneurs. People who understand that each and every one of us has been blessed beyond what we desire or deserve. Each of us has been entrusted with the truth of the Gospel and the light of God presence in our lives.

Luke tells us that Jesus said, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be expected; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." We have been endowed with the gift of faith. Along with this gift everyone one of us has been blessed with abilities, resources and time. Obviously some people are more blessed than others. But, there is no one who has nothing to offer. Those among us who think they are like the one talent slave need to remember that slave had been entrusted with a huge sum of money - 16 years worth of wages.

The reality is God has been generous to us all. It is pretty clear if we have been given much then much is expected. This parable is not just about the stewardship of money, it is about the stewardship of all that we have been blessed with. This parable asks, "What are you doing with the gifts God has given you? How are you using your abilities and resources for God? What are you doing to act on your faith? Are you just going to sit there, bury it in a hole? What are you afraid of?"

This parable also reminds us that will be a day of reckoning. There will be a time when the master returns and wants to know what we have done with that which has been committed to our care. We are making a huge mistake if we think God is not expecting us to do something with the blessings and resources that have been committed into our stewardship.

Daring generosity is rewarded. Taking risks is what faith is all about. Whether it is a risk with money, with our abilities, our time if we ask God to be present with us and bless our endeavors the gift will be multiplied in return.

This morning we shall remember many parishioners who have walked before us in faith and left behind a legacy. The ones who live in my mind, the ones who have shaped my life left more than money, they left a love for the church, a true spirit of caring for other people and a daring generosity. God, grant us the faith to follow where they have led the way.