

Matthew 25:14-30

South Plains

November 16, 2008

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Hold On, But Don't Stop

The hardwood gavel drops and a judge intones the verdict. Whether it's "Judge Judy" or "Judge Joe" or the courtroom in "Law and Order," final judgments fascinate us. We all know what it means to be judged. That's part of the human experience. The great religions speculate about a final judgment at the end of time, and the Judeo-Christian tradition is no exception. At the beginning of the 24th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the disciples ask Jesus, "When will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?" Ninety four verses and three parables later, Jesus finishes his answer. And, we are still not satisfied, because we not only want to know when, but how we will be judged.

Presbyterian don't worry much about the last judgment, at least not out loud. If we think about it at all, we are likely to imagine a checklist similar to the Ten Commandments over against which our obedience or our disobedience is measured. On the other hand, in our better moments we know we are saved by the gracious mercy of God who welcomes us into his kingdom, not because we are good enough, but because Christ is more than good enough.

Nevertheless, Jesus teaches us in the gospel parables that we need to be ready for the last judgment.

This parable is the capitalist version of judgment. This is a clue, not the whole program, but a good clue to get us ready for a judgment that Jesus says is surely coming. But, it does require some interpretation.

A wealthy man entrusts three slaves with a great deal of money. Estimates vary on the value of a "talent" anywhere from a quarter of million dollars to fifteen years' wages. One slave is given five talents, a second receives two talents, and the third gets one talent. The first and second men double their money. They are rewarded with a promotion and the joy of their master. It is the third slave who illustrates the point of the story. He buries his money in the ground so that when the master returns, he is able to give back exactly what he received. This is not the return on his money that the master wanted. The conclusion of the parable is not happy: "As for this worthless slave," says the master, "throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (25:30)."

There's been a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth lately on Wall Street and in our homes. More than a few of us have had fantasies of throwing somebody into the outer darkness for an eternity or two. However, we need to be careful about jumping to conclusions with this story. The parable is not an endorsement of capitalist investment strategy. Capitalism had not been invented yet. Nor does the parable condone sending your broker to prison. Furthermore, the master does not represent a God who is harsh, reaping where he does not sow and

gathering where he does not scatter seed. Like the parables of the unjust judge and the wicked steward, this story is not intended to tell us about God, but about ourselves. It warns us about the very human tendency to fear responsibility in God's kingdom. The third slave illustrates what not to do. Acting out of fear, he hides the money and does nothing with it. He took no risk. Therefore, he receives no reward.

I have a lot of sympathy for that fellow. I don't like risk. I fear things like the high diving board. I have what the psychologists call a "risk averse personality." I'm cautious, sometimes overly so. Churches are cautious and conservative institutions by their very nature. Even in our wildest manifestations, we seek to follow a path laid out for us two thousand years ago. We rightly resist many changes because we believe that the values of our faith endure for eternity. This is good.

What is not so good is when we maintain our traditions for the sake of traditionalism, and when we allow our fears to restrict our obedience to the Holy Spirit. The master calls his slave "wicked and lazy." A better translation might be "wicked and slothful," except that we don't talk much about sloth these days. Maybe, we should.

Notice, first that the slothful slave gave his life over to fear. For fear of his master, he was paralyzed. He couldn't wait to drop his money into that hole in the ground so he wouldn't have responsibility for it. Fear is

OK until it turns to cowardice. Every time we elect new elders, I am grateful for their courage to tackle a job they have never done. The third slave was "entrusted" with his master's money, but he couldn't believe in himself or in his master's judgment. He accepted the money, but not the job, in effect denying the master's trust. When our new elders take office, they will be depending that your trust, your judgment is justified.

This is very close to the language of salvation. God has entrusted us with the grace of salvation. That's the treasure Fred Holbrook talked about last Sunday. Accepting the treasure of grace means that we also accept the risks associated with living in this world as Christians. We can't just go to church for an hour on Sunday and then hide the light of grace under a bushel the other days of the week. We work out our salvation with fear and trembling, as Paul says. The work is living like a Christian so the world hears and sees a difference in our lives. The fear and trembling reminds us that we risk embarrassment and ridicule every time we act on our faith.

Notice also that by his cowardice, the slothful slave rejected his master's trust. I know a church in another town that received a sizeable bequest from an old member. The trouble arose when the donor specified that his friend, whom I'll call Zeke, was to administer the bequest on behalf of the church. Apparently, Zeke was so overwhelmed with this responsibility that he guarded the money so carefully that no one could use it. Over the

years, the whole church adopted Zeke's attitude. The session was afraid to ask for financial reports on the bequest each year. When the church began to grow and needed a new parking lot, Zeke didn't want to let the church buy the vacant lot next door with the bequest. The last I heard, they no longer need extra parking. For a generation that church has stagnated on W. Clark Blvd, stewing over a bequest they are afraid to use. That's slothfulness.

When we are entrusted by God with an opportunity for greater service, we can trust that the Holy Spirit will make a way for us to move forward. Money is not the only gift that churches tend to hoard. We sometimes refuse to recognize the resources among us.

We are gifted at South Plains with members who have a lifetime of service to various churches. We will need to continue drawing on that experience in the coming days. Let's explore what service each member brings, and exploit that experience.

We are gifted with wonderful enthusiasm on the part of new and longtime members. Keep us fired up. We need that energy. I need that energy.

We are gifted with fresh discoveries of love, especially in the lives of our children. We need not only to delight in them, which we all do, but also to enhance their faith, support their parents, and plan for their future in the church.

We have been gifted with the heritage of the Presbyterian way of being Christian in Keswick for almost

two centuries. We cannot rest on that heritage. We need to build on it, to celebrate the faith of the Westminster Catechism, to imitate the tough courage of Scotland, to multiply the teaching ministry of Princeton, Hampton Sydney, Mary Baldwin, and Union-PSCE Seminary; to follow the example of bold Presbyterian pioneers who built new churches in new territory. To whom much is given, much will be expected. We are an extraordinarily gifted people.

The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is heavy with judgment scenes. Whatever punishment God has in mind, surely the worst will be the torment of regret for opportunities ignored and wasted, regret for our unwillingness to follow where Christ would lead, regret for our refusal to walk through the doors that the Holy Spirit opens for us. The harshest judgment we impose on ourselves.

To say that we are blessed at South Plains is almost trite. A dozen times a day, I look out the window of my study in the manse in thanksgiving for the Southwest Mountains and our sanctuary. When folks gather on the grounds after worship or in the manse for a meal, we see and hear the evidence of God's blessings. Each of us is a part of these blessings, but we cannot take much credit. God brought us here. God gave us this fellowship and this opportunity. The question is this: what will we do with the blessings we have received? How will we use them? How will they multiply?