

Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Prov 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31
Ps 128 *passim*
1 Thess 5:1-6
Mt 25:14-30

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We're coming to the end of the liturgical year. Next Sunday will be the feast of Christ the King and right after that comes the season of Advent. And with the start of a new liturgical year, we will end our year-long journey through the Gospel of Matthew.

This is the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time. 33 Sundays . . . That makes a lot of weeks we have been in the green season. Like each liturgical season the green season has an overarching theme. The theme of the green season is discipleship; it addresses the question, What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus?

Back in the last century, a German Lutheran pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an influential book called "The Cost of Discipleship." His main point was that grace, the gift by which we share in God's life, cannot be earned by anything we do. Grace is free, he affirmed, but it's not cheap. Discipleship means something; it costs something. Pastor Bonhoeffer was hanged in the closing days of World War II for opposing Adolf Hitler. For him that's what it meant to follow Jesus. What about for us?

Today's Gospel puts us in the middle of chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew. Chapter 25 wraps up the last discourse Jesus gave until he was hanging on the Cross. Chapter 5 begins Jesus's first discourse, called the Sermon on the Mount. At the very start of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus proclaims the Beatitudes, which we just heard two weeks ago, on the Feast of All Saints. Jesus confronts us with the standards of true happiness. We think we know what happiness is, he tells us, but we, wounded as human nature is, we don't have a clue. Blessed are the poor, he says. Blessed are those of us who mourn, who don't shrink away from pain and sorrow but let the grief and the sorrow and the loss touch us. Blessed are the meek and the peacemakers – the nonviolent who don't use power to crush power. Blessed are those of us who face scorn and derision for doing the right thing and for not doing the wrong thing. In the woundedness of human nature, we think happiness will come from using people and loving stuff. In the Kingdom Jesus proclaims, we love people and use things for God's honor and glory.

Three weeks ago, Jesus told us that the will of God for us is twofold, that we love God with every fiber of our being and that we love each other as another self. Next week, Jesus concludes his final discourse by revealing the last judgment, and he gives us the questions that will be on the final exam. How did we do on the loving one another part?

Did we take care of the poor? Did we care for the hungry and the thirsty, the naked and the homeless, the shut-ins and the prisoners?

The parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel is particularly difficult because on the surface it seems so simple and straightforward. It's a familiar Gospel and you probably already know the usual interpretation. God endows each of us with different gifts. Our job is to put those gifts to productive use, to work hard and take prudent risks, and we will each be called to account ultimately for what we've done with God's gifts. Those seem to be the lessons of today's Gospel and they are all good lessons that we should take to heart, but I suggest to you that they are not the point of today's Gospel.

Here's one problem with the conventional interpretation. For it to work, the master in the parable must represent God. But Jesus takes pains to show that the master is a bad guy. The third servant, the one the master calls wicked, lazy, and useless, the third servant says that the master "harvests where [he] did not plant and gathers where [he] did not scatter," and the master admits as much! Then the master says that the servant should have deposited the measly one talent he was given into the bank, to accrue interest. But at that time, interest-bearing accounts were prohibited by Jewish law. So, Jesus establishes the master as one who cheats and flouts the law. Not a good guy.

Some Scripture scholars today offer an alternative interpretation of this parable, one that fits better with the details of the story – and with the last judgment scene that follows. Their interpretation, however, requires an understanding of ancient economics.

Economics is basically about allocating resources and divvying up wealth. We commonly use the metaphor of the pie. Everybody wants a slice of the pie and everybody wants his slice to be bigger. That is true now; that was true in the time of Jesus. The key difference is that we understand nowadays that it is possible to make the pie bigger, for the benefit of all. In ancient times, wealth was understood to be a closed system: there was only so much wealth, and the pie wasn't going to get any bigger. Economic activity therefore was seen as a zero-sum game. All gains were at the expense of others. The only way one person got a dollar richer is if someone else got a dollar poorer.

Now apply this to today's parable. Both servant A and servant B doubled their master's money. For the master to wind up 7 talents richer – and a talent, incidentally, was an enormous sum of money – somebody else, or a whole bunch of somebody elses, had to be 7 talents poorer. Servant A and servant B played the game, they played it well, and they were richly rewarded in the land where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and get shoved out of the way.

The third servant refused to play the game. Digging a hole and burying something used to be a common method for protecting valuables from loss or theft. The third servant safeguarded the one talent he was given but refused to exploit his fellow human beings in the zero-sum game. And when the master returned, he handed back the one talent and faced the master's scorn and derision for not doing the wrong thing. In his trademark topsy-turvy way, Jesus holds up this unfortunate servant as a model for us to admire and to emulate.

Under this interpretation, the point of the parable rests on a flawed economic theory – namely, that the wealth pie can't be expanded – but nonetheless we must take its basic lesson to heart. In his encyclical on the care of society, Pope St. John Paul II defended the right to private property, but he pointed out that all our property rights are subject to what he called “a social mortgage.” And he exhorted us to be on the lookout for what he called “structures of sin.” We are called to love people and to use things for the greater honor and glory of God. Instead, both individually and collectively, not only as individuals but also as nations and enterprises and organizations, we use people and love things.

Each of us is a unique individual uniquely created by God. We each occupy a unique place in the universe, with a unique history and a unique perspective. We each of us must assess the world around us, through the eyes of Jesus, and where we encounter the structures of sin, we must do whatever we can to opt out. It's not easy to do. Structures of sin suck us in; they make evil look good. And once you've identified them and start opposing them, sin and evil lash out. They play dirty. They laugh at us; they undermine us; they try to cancel us; they push us out to the margins; they cast us into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The Church is the community of those who follow Jesus. The Church reaches out to the marginalized, to those weeping and gnashing in the outer darkness. The third servant, the one who has been rejected and cancelled as wicked, lazy, and useless, is among those whom Jesus is going to quiz us about at the Last Judgment.

And so, I ask it again: do we love things and use people? Or do we love people and use things for the honor and glory of God?