

## PENTECOST XXVII

***“Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping what you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”*** Matthew 25:24

In today’s economy, the third guy, the guy who received one talent, might be feeling pretty good. He hasn’t lost a third of his portfolio. He isn’t stuck with a house worth less than the mortgage he holds. The company he’s worked for these 30 years hasn’t abolished its pension program and isn’t now in liquidation. No, he’s put his cash under his mattress, or stashed it in a savings account in his local bank, and he’s whistling Dixie.

All around him, people are losing, watching their investments evaporate, fearful for their jobs if they still have them, shelving their retirement plans, telling their kids to apply to state colleges rather than fancy private universities. And he hasn’t lost a thing.

On the other hand, he hasn’t gained a thing, except a lot of name -calling and excoriating by his master, who is the stand in for God in this parable. That can’t be a lot of fun.

And is it really true that he has not lost anything? He has lost the trust and approval of his master, he has lost the chance of promotion, of increased responsibility, status, and satisfaction involved in advancement. He has sacrificed the possibility of abundance, and he will end up in outer darkness, deprived of the light of love and joy.

That seems a harsh punishment for mere frugality. But is it really?

When I was meditating about this Gospel during the week, my thoughts kept returning to an old boyfriend of mine, a man I dated when my daughter was small, after my divorce. He was a handsome and intelligent man, hardworking, a single dad with sole custody of his two teenaged daughters. And one of his outstanding qualities was his frugality.

He saved things. Cabinets and drawers all over his house were filled with collections of stuff: old string, old potatoes with sprouts 6 inches long, tins of dried-up shoe polish. I mean, we all have some detritus like this around, but Casey was incapable of getting rid of things. He used only cold water to do his laundry. His house furnishing was old and shabby.

Dates out were limited to restaurants that offered Saturday night specials or huge portions – he loved the Hilltop Steakhouse, for example. Mostly he cooked, and what he cooked was mostly low-end. He did have a spectacular vegetable garden that provided much of what the family consumed all summer, but the winter months were bleak at dinner hour. I remember his

asking me a question once which he had to repeat several times because I couldn't understand it at first: *How long does a canned ham last?*

His big project while we were dating was to build a second floor on his small Cape. But part of the enterprise was to spend little or no money on materials. He went religiously to the Lexington dump each week to scrounge for used lumber. I was put to work at one point chiseling mortar off of old bricks. I was writing my doctoral thesis at the time and I remember thinking, *What's wrong with this picture?*

If Casey's frugality had been limited to things financial, it might have been more comical than sad. But it permeated every area of his life, and dictated all his behavior and all his decisions. He was a very talented engineer but he had not been to college, and his advancement at Polaroid was limited because of that. His bosses all urged him to get a college degree but he wouldn't, couldn't, go ahead with that. He was reluctant to spend the time and the money. And I'm sure, more deeply, he was afraid to spend himself – to risk finding out how he would fare in an unfamiliar context.

And he was stingy with his heart. He was very cautious in his dating, he was reluctant to introduce his girlfriends to his daughters until we had passed some kinds of unacknowledged tests, he was parsimonious with words of affection, and he, in the parlance of so many popular self-help books about the perils of relationships, he was commitment-averse.

His emotional reserve was frustrating at first; then it became painful. The relationship was what it was, he said, Wasn't I happy with that? Well, no, I wasn't, and finally, inevitably, I began to see other men. When he found this out, he was devastated, and then, and only then, did he declare his passionate and undying love for me. But by that time, it was really too late. I had been held at arm's length for too long, I had been hurt too much, and despite some attempts at reconciliation and moving forward, I was really done, and we were done.

In the painful aftermath, the rehashing of all this, it turned out that the same thing had happened with every woman in Casey's life, beginning with the wife he'd gotten pregnant and married when he was sixteen. Every one had cheated on him. Every woman had been "the one," for him, in his mind, but he had failed to let any of us know that until too late.

Casey and I kept in touch for a few years after our break-up, and I watched the same pattern repeat itself several more times. He found the love of his life, and she left him, over and over again. All of his girlfriends, as far as I could tell, were attractive, smart women with plenty to offer. He was not a bad chooser. But he was a disastrous keeper, ironically, of women. He

couldn't get rid of any thing. But he couldn't keep any of us. He didn't understand the economy of love- that giving begets giving, that generosity is the key to abundant life.

Occasionally now I drive by his house in Lexington. The second floor is finally, finally completed. But I doubt it happened before his daughters moved out – and making bedrooms for them had been the chief point of the whole exercise. I know he still lives there, because a vintage Studebaker of his continues to rust away in the driveway. I don't take that route often, because seeing the place makes me sad.

Oh, and by the way, Casey is the only person I've ever known who kept all his money in the bank. No one could ever get him to invest in anything. He may be feeling smug about that now. But unless he changed his ways, he missed all the opportunities of the 80's and 90's and early 2000's. He may not have lost any money, but he's only gained what a savings account pays in interest. And in the economy of love, he may well have lost just about everything.

On the surface, he lost through frugality. But excessive prudence, like excessive consumption, becomes a liability, a defect, rather than a virtue. Excessive prudence, at bottom is a symptom of fear. And fear, as St. Paul tells us, is the enemy of love.

We are in the season of the year when churches all across the country are engaging in our annual pledge drives. I suspect the crafters of the lectionary know this, and assign the parable of the talents in a timely fashion, to give preachers everywhere an entrée into our talk of church finances.

And we have to have this talk. We at St John's need the generous commitments of our parishioners in order to keep our operation going. We need you to pledge whatever you possibly can to support our budget, a budget that, believe me, has no excess. Your vestry and finance committee dream about the day when we may have some line items in the budget for *programs*. As it is now, we struggle to meet our payroll, pay our utility bills, provide basic supplies, and keep a small cushion for emergencies.

Our basement renovation has been a spectacular accomplishment. Our capital campaign raised more from parishioners and friends that I had dared to dream. People gave creatively, sacrificially, and repeatedly, to make this project possible. We financed the remainder of the project with our endowment, now severely diminished. As I said to the vestry, at least we spent it before we lost it in the market decline. But either way, it's gone, and we need to replenish that, as well as pay our operating expenses.

It's a difficult environment, I know, in which to ask you for money. We are all feeling insecure, apprehensive, and somewhat fearful about the economy on a grand scale and about our

personal circumstances. It would be marvelous to be able to rest in the jubilation I believe we all felt on election night and in the unbound celebration of our service last Sunday. But reality is more complex than that, more mixed, and right now, somewhat threatening.

Nonetheless, I know how much St John's means to you. So many of you have spoken to me about this church as the place you come for consolation and inspiration, for stimulation and challenge, and for peace and for community. Here is where you come – where we all come, to find the abundant life promised by Jesus, to recall, and to be recalled by, the boundless love and mercy of God.

At the end of the service today, we will once again take a few minutes to talk with our neighbors in the practice called one-on-one conversations. I will ask you to share your thoughts on two questions. First, *what is your passion? What do you care about most?* This is not a church-focused question – or it need not be. *What is your major passion in life?* Then, second, *what gift or talent do you have to offer to this community?* My hope and expectation is that your two answers would be related – that your passion will suggest to you some way you can contribute to our life together.

You will see at the back of the church a bulletin board posted with a number of slips of paper. These are the gifts and talents offered by all who participated in the parish discussion with Frank Fornaro several weeks ago about our parish life together. After we've finished our one-on-ones, I invite you to fill out a slip yourself and post it on the board – on the side for individual gifts *to* the parish. We'll deal with gifts *of* the parish another time.

And please, in the next days and weeks, think and pray about how you can contribute to St John's this year with treasure, as well as with time and talent. I believe that we who pledge to the parish discover that the money we give multiplies itself—as the talents of the two faithful servants also multiplied. Somehow, we all end up with more than we had before – more commitment, more community, more contentment, more love.

And that, my dear friends, is the promise Jesus leaves us with today: By giving, we enter into the joy of our Creator, our Savior, our boundlessly loving God.

Alleluia! Amen