

Trinity Church
November 16, 2008

27th Sunday after Pentecost
RCL, Year A, Proper 28

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our substance, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As you know, the Sunday readings are assigned from a carefully planned lectionary. They have no relationship to current events or circumstances. Because this is so, it is all the more ironic when the assigned readings do relate to current events. Today's reading from Judges is the only place in Scripture that I know of where the name Barak occurs. Barak is the general the prophetess Deborah lifts up to defend God's people against the Canaanite warrior, Sisera. Barak, with Deborah's help, is victorious. Just as the Lincolns chose the Biblical name Abraham for their son, the Obamas chose the Biblical name Barack for their son. May Barack Obama be a blessing for us as the Biblical Barak was a blessing long ago to God's people. Meanwhile, the prophetess Deborah can be found living with me. I wonder who she voted for?

Paul says that we cannot know what tomorrow will bring. Try as we might, we are not able to predict the future. Just when we say, "There is peace and security," then suddenly economic recession. No one knows when the labor pains will begin for a pregnant woman, but once they do begin, there is no escaping them. So then, keep awake and be alert.

But how should we be alert in this world, and for what? The what is easier to answer. We are waiting for the master to return and to settle accounts with us. That's what Jesus says in the parable. The Lord will surely come, that we know. We must be ready to give an account of ourselves at every moment, lest we be found wanting. Make no mistake. The end of all things is that they should come to their consummation in God's fullness and in God's justice. We have been invited to be part of God's work to bring that about. That's how we should be alert and awake. We should be about God's work in the world and in our lives.

The parable of the talents tells us more, though, and it is good news. The master, Jesus, in his death, resurrection, and ascension, has called us his servants, and he has given us an immense treasure, each according to our ability. That treasure is beyond price. There is no calculating its value. Paul calls it the breastplate of faith and love, our helmet the hope of salvation. What we have been given is Christ himself, and new life in him. So now we must bend every effort, use every God-given talent and ability, use every moment of time given to us, every breath, to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. To be about the work of the kingdom that is surely and certainly coming on earth as it is in heaven.

We have been given spiritual gifts. Jesus calls us to be spiritual entrepreneurs, putting these gifts and the immense treasure of the Gospel to work in our lives and in the lives and world around us.

Unlike financial investing, there is no risk. We cannot lose the Gospel. We cannot run out of grace. There is no end to justice. The more of the Good News we give away, the more there is to share and the more deeply it abides in us.

So what is up with the slave who buries the treasure? What was he thinking? The Gospel is of no use unless it is proclaimed. Justice is valuable only in the doing of it. Love is lost if it is not shared with the beloved. To bury the treasure is to bury Christ in the stone cold tomb with no hope of resurrection. It is the darkness of night where none can see, where drunken deeds are done, and where well-meaning watchers fall asleep at the switch.

Every once in a while we get a call from someone baptized here at Trinity who has abandoned the faith and wants their name stricken from the baptismal record. They want to bury their treasure forever. Young people are invited to confirmation. Almost always, some say no, I don't want the treasure that is beyond all price; bury it. I see adults who were very active in the life of faith with their children turn away from God once their children are grown. I don't need the treasure any more. They throw it away.

Jesus has harsh words for those wicked and lazy slaves. Take the talent from him and give it to the one who received ten. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness. The hard truth is that even God cannot save those who themselves turn their back on God and deliberately throw God's treasure away, together with their faith and hope and love. All that is left is darkness.

But we belong to the day. We are those who are obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that we might live in him. We have been given the priceless treasure of the Gospel. We have spiritual gifts. We have been given time, talents, treasure. And we are meant to put all of this to work in the world to make God's kingdom real.

We gather our treasure to support the work of the church. We give our time to reach our children and encourage our youth, and visit the sick. We express our talents in the worship of God and in acts of loving compassion. We express our faith in faithful relationships and loving commitment to Christ and the church. We are spiritual entrepreneurs, trying to express the Gospel in ways that invite people into Christ's life. We enter into the joy of the master. We eagerly await his coming.

Perhaps we should re-write the stewardship prayer from the Prayer Book this way:

Gift-giving God, you have put into our hands the life-giving and priceless treasure of Jesus Christ. Grant us grace that we may always honor this gift with our time, our talent, and our treasure. And remembering the account we must one day give, make us spiritual entrepreneurs, sharing your treasure with the world, and hastening the coming of your kingdom, through Christ our Lord. Amen.