

Proper 28, Yr. A

Mt. 25:14-30

A recent article in *The New York Times* reported: "...the A above high C that the soprano Audrey Luna reaches in Thomas Ades's new opera, "The Exterminating Angel," is so high, it has never been sung in the 137-year history of the Metropolitan Opera....a high A --- a combination of genetic gifts, rigorous training and psychological discipline over two fragile vocal cords --- is monumental, and unprecedented at the Met...." [End quote.] Hers is an extraordinary talent.

If we were to interpret Jesus' words from this morning's Gospel literally, we'd say His reference to 5 talents is an equally monumental and unprecedented gift, an extraordinary amount of money. 5 talents is more than 82 years worth of earnings for a slave. But Jesus speaks metaphorically more often than not, and tradition has equated the talents of this passage with gifts: gifts of faith, gifts of physical and spiritual resources, even gifts of musical richness.

You and I know some people are simply more gifted than others. Some people are just more richly endowed than their neighbors, whether those endowments be brains or beauty or billions. What's more, there are statistics quoted regularly demonstrating that the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The War on Poverty is dead, and it seems such a war is the antithesis of the abundance for the rich that Jesus is proclaiming: More for those who have more. Less for those who have less. Is that really what Jesus is saying?

"The kingdom of heaven will be as when a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them....To all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." How familiar, and troubling.

This summer I attended an international conference of scholars researching the Shroud of Turin. Some of these professors had never been to the United States, so I asked one of them what he thought when he flew into Seattle. "It was depressing," he said. "On the one hand everywhere is evidence of great wealth; on the other, terrible poverty. We have poor people in my country," he continued, "but yours are desperate."

What is the vision you and I see when we hear, "To all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Do we see in our mind's eye the men, and sometimes women, sleeping under the viaduct when we walk off the ferry? Do we avert our glance when confronted by their desperation?

We know that disparities between people and nations are not new. They are old. There have always been disparities in ability and disparities in possessions. The tendency in the American land of opportunity has been to equate success with enterprise and poverty with sloth. In other words, good things happen to good people. But way back in the dark ages, when I was a sophomore in college, there appeared a book about these disparities: *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* by David M. Potter. The thesis of the book was that democracy works only in countries that are richly endowed with natural resources--water, forests, minerals, rich farm land capable of producing an abundance of crops. In countries without those natural resources, our kind of democracy simply

isn't possible. Living freely is attainable only for those already richly blessed. In other words, "To those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, nothing will result."

To test that thesis one has only to fly over Tanzania from Dar es Salaam to Dodoma to see dried up river beds with pock marks. The pock marks are the result of people's digging down in the dry river beds in search of water, any tiny bit of water for sustenance.

In the 1960's *People of Plenty* was not widely read outside academic circles. In that era of sexual revolution and self-indulgence, people were not ready to hear its message. That old news grew far too foreign to their experience. But a book with a similar thesis came out in 1997. Its paperback edition was on the best seller list of the *Washington Post* for more than 45 weeks. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, Jared Diamond wrote that "good institutions always arose because of a long chain of historical connections from ultimate causes rooted in...geography."¹ Diamond's thesis was that "History followed different courses for different people because of differences among peoples' environments, not because of biological differences among peoples themselves."² More than forty years after the publication of *People of Plenty*, a researcher is again saying some nations are simply more richly endowed with natural resources, and that fact has not only changed individual lives but also the course of history. The statistics are all too familiar, and troubling. Our data tell us poverty and power are antithetical.

"To those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Why, Jesus? What's equitable about such distribution? You say you give to us according to our ability; but if our abilities are unequal, what's fair about distributing more to those who have more and less to those with less? You start out by giving more to the person who is richly blessed and less to the person who lacks much. And in the end? It's the same thing all over again, only multiplied.

Yes, we find this parable truly troublesome, not least because of familiar parallels in our own experience. Matthew's Jesus prophesies judgment, and we protest that His judgment is unfair. What's more, one of Matthew's primary ethical concerns throughout his gospel is the relationship of Christians to possessions; so why the apparent applause for increasing one's monetary wealth? What is going on here? Is God really that easy to figure out? Could it be that God is not as familiar as we think? Is it possible that the God we know is a god of our own making and not the God who reigns over all the earth as a mystery beyond our comprehension? Perhaps we should look at the parable with fresh eyes.

Consider the context of this parable. This morning's extended metaphor, or parable, comes toward the close of a lengthy discussion Jesus is having with his disciples about the end of time. Jesus is speaking metaphorically, making foreign what is familiar. For immediately after this discussion begin the events of His betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. Jesus is teaching his band of followers about living

¹ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (W. W. Norton

² Ibid. 25.

as disciples without His presence on earth, and they are not ready to hear that news. That news is far **too** foreign to their experience; so He speaks in metaphors.

If we look carefully at the original Greek language of this text, we see immediately how limited our English translation is. At its root what the original text says is, "For it will be as when a man leaving home on a journey invited his own, those bound to him, to come; and he handed over...himself, his being, his existence to them." His was a power made perfect in poverty, the power of relinquishing need, the freedom of letting go. In other words, Jesus is about to begin the journey to the cross, leaving with His disciples His mission to the world. To the body of believers, He gives himself, distributed according to the nature of the recipients.

The rich are those who understand that power lies in poverty, Jesus is saying. Risk is the way of discipleship, for we don't "possess" anything. We don't own our lives. All that we are is a gift from the One who owns all of life. Living is simply stewarding, not hiding or attempting to hold, that gift. When we use what God has given us, we affirm our relationship with Him. We live and know the reality that whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for the sake of Christ and His good news will save it.

What would such risk-taking living look like? This last weekend we observed Veterans' Day. If you have ever been in England on Nov. 11---what the English still call Armistice Day---you will have witnessed what risking one's life in order to save it looks like. Every eleventh day...of the eleventh month...at 11 a.m., everything in England stops. Trains don't run. Radio and TV are silent. And everyone in every village or city goes to the cenotaph at the center of town, the memorial to the heroes of World War I, the War to end all Wars. At the cenotaph wreaths are laid and prayers are offered in thanksgiving for the lives sacrificed for freedom. Those who died in that war came from every walk of life, with every kind of gift: rich and poor, good-looking and not so striking, professional and blue collar. Their lives are held in reverence, not because of the enemy they fought but because of who they were: heroes who held the rights of all men and women sacred. One of those heroes wrote this poem just before taking the sacred risk:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.³

The War to End all Wars, the War OF poverty, the War of Jesus against the powers of this world proclaims the truth that all humans are created in the image of God, all are equally precious---rich and poor individuals, wealthy and impoverished nations--all are God's treasured possession and therefore worthy of our care and concern as we are worthy of His. You and I have been entrusted with God's concern. We have been entrusted with the life of Christ and His life-giving work just as surely as those first disciples were. We have been given a sacred trust, a charge to change our reality from the familiar ...to the possible. And when we do so, ours will be extraordinarily good news indeed.

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³ Lt.-Col. John McCrae, M.D. (1872-1918)