

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church
Keller, Texas
Sermon for November 15, 2020 ~ Proper 28a
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

As we approach the end of the liturgical year, the Sunday readings focus more and more on the events of the end of all time, “The Day of the Lord.”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the conception of the Day of the Lord is very common. In this view, all time was divided into two ages. There was the present age, which is fraught with problems, and the age to come, which would be the golden age of God’s reign. In between, there was The Day of the Lord, which would be a terrible day in which one world was shattered and another was born. Its main characteristics were (1) it would come suddenly and unexpectedly, (2) it would involve a cosmic upheaval in which the universe was shaken to its very foundations, (3) it would be a time of judgment and accountability.

Jesus told a parable to provide an insight into his view of that day. The Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 tells of a master who was leaving his home to travel, and before going entrusted his property to his servants. The property he entrusted to them was worth eight talents. Although there is some scholarly disagreement about the exact size of the common talent used in New Testament times, in Jesus’ Parable of the Talents, it must have been a unit of currency worth about 6,000 denarii. Since a denarius was the usual payment for a day’s work, a talent was roughly the value of twenty years of work by an ordinary person.

One servant receives five talents, the second receives two talents, and the third receives one talent, according to their respective abilities. Returning after a long absence, the master asks his servants for an accounting. The first two servants explain that they have each put their money to work and doubled the value of the property they were entrusted with, and so they are each rewarded. The third servant, however, has merely hidden his talent in a hole in the ground, and is punished for being lazy.

The talent in the parable is obviously currency, but this parable is the origin of the sense of the word “talent” meaning “gift or skill” as used in English and other languages. For centuries, the Church has used this parable to teach its members about the faithful investment of all the resources God entrusts to us, monetary and otherwise. It suggests several things about the investments of a Christian disciple.

Our faith requires us to be willing to invest all we are and all we have. When some great cause emerges, it is bound to divide people. There are bound to be people who answer and others who refuse the challenge. To be confronted by Jesus Christ is to be faced with the choice of whether to trust God and invest our lives in God’s kingdom or to resist God and invest our lives in temporal and transitory things. The world is always divided between those who take up their crosses and follow Christ and those who don’t. Many find the challenge too demanding. And, I must add that for those who do follow Christ, there is the ever-present danger of self-righteousness and judgmentalism toward those who do not.

If the call of Christ were an easy challenge, anything other than a total investment, it wouldn’t be redemptive. Living life in the light, always ready to be Christ’s person in any situation, causes tremendous warfare in the human spirit. It produces conflicts in loyalties. That’s because it’s counter culture.

In George Bernard Shaw’s play *Androcles and the Lion*, the Roman captain asks Lavinia, a young Christian, why she is willing to die as a martyr. She says, “It is since all the stories and dreams have gone that I now have no doubt at all that I must die for something greater than dreams or stories.” The Captain asks, “But for

what?” And Lavinia replies, “I don’t know. If it were for anything small enough to know, it would be too small to die for. I think I’m going to die for God. Nothing else is real enough to die for.”

That kind of radical faith investment is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer had in mind when he said, “When Christ calls a person, he bids that person to come and die.” We are to die to self so that we can live to Christ. That death makes the other death, the physical one, impotent. But it requires us to be willing to invest all we are and all we have.

Our investments determine the direction of our lives. Our investments reveal our true core values and purpose. Matthew was writing somewhere between 80 and 90 A.D.. He was therefore writing during some of the bitterest days of persecution. He was saying to the Christians of that era, “The time may well come when you can save your life by abandoning your faith; but if you do, you will in reality lose your life.” How you live up to your commitment, how you manage this one important investment, will determine the direction of your life.

In our generation and in this country, it is not likely to be a question of martyrdom, but it still remains a fact that, if we constantly concern ourselves with the search for safety, security, ease, pleasure, and comfort, if every decision is made from worldly wise and prudential motives, or from our own convenience, then we are losing all that makes life worthwhile. Life becomes soft and flabby when it could have been radiant. Life becomes earthbound when it could have been reaching for the stars.

In the novel *The Great Hunger* by Johan Borger, the story is told of Peer Holm, a world-famous engineer, companion of kings, who was a genius. Nothing seemed too big for him. He built bridges over canyons, railroads across deserts, dams in mountain passes, and bored tunnels under rivers. He had honor, wealth, and success.

When his health broke, with it came poverty and failure. His life ruined, he returned to the little village where he had started. There, with his wife and little girl, he farmed a small plot of ground and helped the village blacksmith.

Peer Holm had a very disagreeable neighbor. To keep people away, he kept a fierce dog. Peer Holm warned his neighbor that the dog was dangerous but the old man angrily refused to heed the warning. One day Peer Holm heard a shriek and saw the dog mauling his daughter. He carried her home where she died in a short while. The sheriff shot the dog but it was too late.

The villagers were so enraged that they wanted to drive the old man from their village. When planting time came, they would not sell him any seed. His field was plowed but it lay bare. He could not beg, borrow, or steal seed. Peer Holm could not sleep at night for thinking of his neighbor’s field, which lay bare. Early one morning, he rose and went to his shed, took his last half bushel of seed, and after climbing the fence, sowed it in his neighbor’s field.

Springtime revealed the story of Peer Holm’s generosity. As the days grew warm, part of Peer Holm’s field lay bare, but his neighbor’s was planted. While he had experienced great tragedy and tremendous personal loss, the one investment that mattered most guided the direction of his life to the end so that he could be a generous, forgiving person. When asked why he sowed his neighbor’s field, Peer Holm replied, “So that for me God might live.” He knew that he could not possibly love God if he did not forgive his neighbor and show compassion for him.

Our investment in that which is ultimate determines the direction of our lives.

Our investments yield the highest of dividends. It brings life! Unless we are willing to bet our lives on that which we believe to be the highest and surest and best, we will never really know life – only existence. Whatever we own, truly own, here and now as well as in the last analysis will be measured in terms of what we invested in the things of the spirit.

It is a lesson of history that those who have improved our common life on this planet are those adventuresome persons who have bid farewell to personal safety and security. Unless there had been those prepared to take risks, many medical cures would not exist. Many of the machines that make life easier would never have been invented. Unless there were mothers prepared to take risks, no child would ever be born. Life and progress come only as the result of the death of self-seeking and self-concern.

There are those among us here in this parish who are living with this reality right now. You are paying an enormous price for the decisions your faith in Christ has led you to make. You know better than most of us what is the high cost of discipleship.

Our faith leads us on a journey that is often not easy. If ease and comfort were the essence of our discipleship, Jesus would not have included “take up your cross” in the invitation to follow him. But in his view of things, the way of the cross is the way of life. When we die to selfishness and sin, we are raised to new and eternal life. This life comes not from our own hands or through the things we possess, but as a gift from our Shepherd and Guardian of our Souls, by whom and for whom the cosmos was created. To search elsewhere is to miss life altogether.

How are you investing your greatest treasures today? Are you investing fearfully and cautiously in things that are safe but temporary? Or, are you investing with trust and confidence in the highest and best, those things that yield abundant life and its dividends?