

Zephaniah 1:12-18

Psalm 90:1-8

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon for November 19

FREE AT LAST

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Summary: Jesus died for our sins.

A number of years ago, hackers broke into the data base of OPM, which stands for Office of Personnel Management, which is the governmental agency that manages the retirement programs of the civil service of the federal government, and in so doing these hackers managed to gain access to the personal records of everyone who had ever worked for the government in a civil capacity, whether for the department of agriculture or the department of education or, as I once did for a few years, for the United States Postal Service. To my knowledge, the identity of the hackers was never determined; they may have been agents of the KGB or the CIA or maybe just some middle schoolers taking a break from playing video games...which wouldn't surprise me a bit, knowing what I do about the technical expertise of OPM bureaucrats.

But in any event, the government quickly came to the rescue by providing all of us federal employees a lifetime of Identity monitoring of our credit reports and some other matters. I am of course grateful for that – although it would have been nice if they had had more effective controls to begin with – but one side effect of that monitoring, for reasons I cannot fathom and I again attribute to a certain Keystone Cops element of the whole bureaucratic apparatus, is that every so often I get an urgent notice via email that a person convicted at some point in life of a sex offense has taken up residence anywhere near me in Orleans County, someone who is on the so-called Sex Offender Registry. I don't get such a notice about bank robbers or embezzlers or counterfeiters taking up residence near me, only sex offenders; and why that should have any relevance to my financial security or credit card security, I have no idea...but, here again, this is the federal government we're talking about.

Now, I don't feel any particular sympathy for these individuals, but in thinking about them, it seems to me that they provide a particularly clear illustration of something that I think lies at the heart of the instruction in our Gospel selection for today, of people who are, in a sense, bound by, or weighted down by, their past, in a way that they can never escape, from which they will never be free.

So let's read our selection together first, and then think about the connection.

Matthew 25: 14-30.

When thinking about one of Our Lord's parables, it's always helpful to try to keep two things separate. The first is who the audience was that the parable was originally delivered to, because that's helps to determine what point Jesus actually had in mind in crafting and delivering it. It's important to keep that separate from the question of what other Christian messages we can find support for in thinking about the parable, in isolation from its audience of the time.

For example, just by reflecting on our parable for today by itself, without thinking about the particular audience Jesus was addressing, you can generate many powerful Christian lessons and exhortations.

It can lead us to reflect on the fact that God gives different gifts to different people. One man in the parable receives five hundred pieces of silver, another two hundred, and another one hundred. And the moral is that it is not the particular nature of the gift one receives that matter; it's the how we use it, what we do with it. Christians are not equal in talent; but they can be equal in effort. The lesson of the parable is that whatever talent we have, little or great, we must offer it in service to God.

Or the parable can teach us that the reward of work well done is still more work to do. The two servants who had done well and multiplied the money are not promised a permanent vacation now; on the contrary, they are given even greater tasks and responsibilities in the service of their master.

Or it can teach us that the man who is punished is the man who will not try. The problem with the third servant, after all, is not that his investments and projects for the money didn't pan out; it was that he didn't even try to do anything; he just took the money and buried it.

These are all strong and good messages, and there are others we could as Christians profit from as well. And these are certainly the kind of message you will hear most often delivered from the pulpit, and that richness of possible meaning is certainly what has given this and the other parables much of their vitality down through the centuries.

But having granted that, I think that if our primary purpose is always to discover the mind of Christ Himself, then it behooves us to reflect, in the first place, on what His central point was in offering this particular parable, in the place and time where he offered it, and the audience to whom it was primarily addressed. And if we do that, what we will conclude - and for lack of time I have to simply assert this here without giving all the background thinking behind it - we will conclude that the parable was originally addressed to, and in criticism of, the religious authorities of the time and place: the Jewish priests and scribes and especially the Pharisees.

These are the same groups of functionaries that were most deeply threatened by Jesus, and who eventually conspired to put Him to death. Had Jesus simply been a country preacher telling little stories about the importance of using your talents and trying your hardest, there would have been nothing about him to provoke a murderous animosity. Yet the Gospel writers are all very clear in informing us that that's exactly what Jesus and his 'little stories' did.

And if we keep that in mind and now return to the parable, I think we can see pretty clearly what there was about it that might have fueled the hatred of the Pharisees.

The religion of the Jews, the religion to which the priests and scribes and Pharisees had dedicated their lives was essentially a tribal religion. That means it was a religion in which the relationship that mattered to God is his relationship to the tribe, to the nation of Israel. Its purified essence can be found in Deuteronomy 5: 9: *...You shall not bow down to other gods or serve them. For I, the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquities of the fathers who hate me upon their children to the third and fourth generations.*

Listen again to the passage from Zephaniah that we heard this morning: *Be silent in the presence of the Lord God, for the day of the Lord is at hand, for the Lord has prepared a sacrifice; he has invited his guests...I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men....Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to*

deliver them In the day of the Lord's wrath; but the whole land shall be devoured by the fire of his jealousy. For he will make speedy riddance of all those who dwell in the land.

Or hear again the message from Psalm 90: *For we have been consumed by your anger, and by Your wrath we are terrified...For all our days have passed away in Your wrath: we finish our years like a sigh.*

In ancient Judaism, as in all tribal religions, what matters over everything to its god is not what I have done, but what my tribe has done, what my nation has done. My identity in such a god's eyes is defined not by what I have done, not by who I am, but by what my tribe has done, by what my tribe is.

And if we keep that in mind and now return to the parable, I think we can see pretty clearly what there was about it that might have fueled the hatred of the Pharisees.

Remember always, Jesus came to announce the Good News about who God is and what God is like, and to initiate the dominion of **that** God, the God Jesus referred to as Father, over all the earth. The very first words of Christ's earthly ministry pretty much say it all:

The time is fulfilled and the dominion of God is at hand; change your whole way of thinking, and believe in the good news. (Mark 1: 15)

What Jesus came to reveal to us, both in his instruction and in his life, was that the relationship that matters, the only relationship that matters to God, is the personal relationship with each unique individual. That's why he taught us to think of God as our Father. A father does not have a relationship with something called "his children." there is nothing called "his children" that exists, independent of this child, and this child, and this child. The father's relationship is with each and every one of those separate children.

In the Christian way of thinking, in Christ's way of thinking, I am not responsible in God's eyes for what my parents did, forget about four generations back. To put it another way, what Christ revealed is our complete and eternal freedom to shape our own personal relationship with God.

And we now begin to understand the deep meaning of our parable, and why those religious leaders would have found its message intolerable. What do we see in it?

We see the third servant who, on being given a great and free gift, does nothing with it. On the contrary, out of fear he literally hides it, buries it in darkness, renders it useless to others and even to himself.

That's the nature of the opposition that confronted Jesus. He had brought a new and startling and, to his audience, unacceptable revelation, that of God's vibrant, vital, free and loving personal, one-on-one relation with His human creation...and the organized Jewish opposition was taking that gift and smothering it, denying it, burying it in the dirt. Rather than accepting that freedom, and the new ways of thinking it requires, they eventually made their choice. They retreated to their tribal safety. They sent Jesus to the Cross.

But the revelation of Christ survived the Cross, and remains the central Christian message today. And what can we learn from that today? How does this matter to us?

We could, of course, carry these reflections into the contemporary political sphere, and begin to recognize how much of what we see around the world and even in our own culture is at its heart a movement to retribalize our way of thinking, to reestablish our most essential identity not on a one-on-one relationship with God, not on our unique status as individual children of God, but rather on our ethnic or ancestral or sexual or national or political tribe. This way of thinking still prevails in literally all parts of the world in which Christianity never successfully took root, and even here in the West these days, the renewal of what is essentially a tribal religion – although it doesn't think of itself that way – accounts for the vitriolic hatred of Christianity we find among its adherents.

But politics stops at our doors, remember, so instead I want to return to the somewhat quirky illustration with which we began, that of the sex offenders whose guilt in a sense follows them around forever, wherever they go, whatever they do. Because of their particular crime, they have in effect a life sentence. And I want to contrast that with what we have, because of what Jesus Christ did for us.

When Jesus spoke the parable of the talents and the three servants, aside from the freedom from the tribal way of thinking, he was revealing something that no one in his audience could possibly have understood, something that was far more marvelous than our freedom to live our lives as unique and precious children of God, our freedom from the various tribes into which we have all been born. What he was revealing was something that would not be accomplished, and that therefore could not even be contemplated, until after his death and resurrection.

What he was anticipating was not only our freedom from the world's constraints, but the freedom from our own sinful lives, indeed, from our own sinful nature. Because, you see, on the cross, Jesus died for **our** sins, and he was raised for **our** justification.

And this is perhaps why the true and full work of Christ remains just as unfathomable and for many of us just as unacceptable as the instruction of the parable was to the priests and scribes and Pharisees who were listening to him back then. This is perhaps why we ourselves are inclined to bury it in the earth out of an inability to comprehend the true magnitude of God's mercy towards us, of God's forgiveness of us, of God's love for us.

As Paul put it in his letter to the Galatians: *For freedom Christ has set us free.* (5: 1)

Whatever sentences the world may impose on us for our mistakes, whatever penalties the world may demand for our misjudgments, whatever price the world may require for our sins, in the eyes of God, Jesus paid the price, in the eyes of God, Jesus met the demands, in the eyes of God, Jesus served out our sentences on the Cross. Jesus set the sex offenders among us free; Jesus set the murderers among us free; Jesus set the alcoholics and addicts, the thieves and liars, the saints and sinners among us free. Jesus died fall for all of **us**. Jesus died for **our** sins; Jesus was raised for **our** justification.

So today we pray in gratitude. Free at last, free at last. Because of what Christ did for **us**, thank God Almighty, we are free at last! Amen.