FOR FREEDOM… Sermon for November 19

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[**Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=169#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=169#psalm_oth_reading)

[**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=169#epistle_reading)

[**Matthew 25:14-30**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=169#gospel_reading)

This is the time of the year when many kids go off to college, when they stop being ‘kids,’ technically speaking, and turn into something that will eventually turn into an adult, if everything works out.  Our Cheyenna and our Shannon are examples of that that we all experienced, and of course for many of us the same thing happens in an even more personal context.

I myself provided an extreme example of this when I went off to college, many moons ago.  Up until that time, I had lived my whole life in Grand Forks, North Dakota, smack in the middle of the United States, on its northern border.   Come fall of that year I found myself in Portland, Oregon, about as far from home as you could get without running into an ocean.

I was young, of course, and exceptionally oblivious – even for my age – so I didn’t really appreciate the nature or the magnitude of the change of my circumstances.  But looking back, I realize it could be best described in terms of freedom.  Freedom in the obvious sense that I was no longer under direct parental supervision; but freedom also in a much larger and deeper sense, I think.  I was free not only from the restrictions of my home, but also free now from all the rules and habits and expectations and familiarities and friends and routines that had pretty much occupied and defined my entire life.

That radical and abrupt separation of distance and venue granted me a freedom to basically start my life over, if not from scratch, at least from a very fundamental level.  The friends I had would now be the friends I chose, the habits would be the ones I chose to cultivate, the expectations of me would be entirely ones that I myself created.

The practical results of that sort of freedom are often surprising.   I can think of one fellow I graduated with from high school who – as I discovered through the magic of Facebook – has gone on to a very successful and prominent career as a lawyer in New York.  But for the life of me, I have no memory of him of any kind from high school.  Clearly the use he made of his new freedom was highly productive.  And I imagine most everyone here could point to other cases where the freedom resulting from a sharp change of circumstances had surprising results, both for better and worse.

Remembering all this at this time of year helps us to understand the message of our gospel reading for today.   The reading contains a parable, and it is the second of three parables that, combined, constitute the entire 25th chapter of Matthew.  The first parable is the parable of the ten virgins that Sheryl talked about last Sunday, and the third is the parable of the sheep and the goats that Jim will talk about next Sunday. In between we have the parable that runs from v. 14 to v. 30. So let's read it together.

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 the parable was originally delivered to, because that 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.

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)

But what was the way of thinking that the good news was to replace? It was exactly the way of thinking of the priests and the scribes and the Pharisees. It was thinking of God as a lawgiver and judge. It was a religion of meticulous rules governing every single aspect of life, from the most important to the most insignificant, maintaining itself through a finely calibrated system and rigid system of fines and punishment. It was a way of life governed by fearful obedience, where God's approval was not in response to acts of love and mercy, but to acts of meticulous ritual observance.

Look now again at the parable, and what do we see? 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 the greatest gift God had to offer to God's own creation, that of a vibrant, vital, free and loving relation with God Himself...and the opposition was taking that gift and smothering it, denying it, burying it in the dirt.

Jesus was offering them a choice: a new, free and loving personal relationship with God; or the old rigid relationship, stultified and fear-filled, yes, but still offering them positions of prominence and authority. And they eventually made their choice. They sent Jesus to the Cross.

Near the end of the other great chapter of parables in Matthew, Chapter 13, where we find the parables of the Sower and the seed, and of the lump of leaven, and of the treasure hidden in the field, and of the pearl of great price, and of several others...and after offering all those parables, Jesus asks his disciples whether they've understood these things. And after they reassure them that they have, he tells them that therefore they're now equipped to bring new treasures out of their house. (Matthew 13: 51-52)

I believe that's the deepest meaning of our parable for this morning. The gift Christ brought is fundamentally the gift of freedom: the freedom to recreate our own lives. Just like that first-year student going off to school, the good news for us is that we now have ownership of who we are to be in God's Kingdom. For some, that choice will involved radical redirection, For others, perhaps more fortunately situated in regards to their background and environment, it may simply be the choice to continue as before. But in either event, it is now our choice, rather than a choice the world has made for us. And that is either an exhilarating prospect, or one we prefer to bury in the earth.

As Paul put it succinctly in his letter to the Galatians: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.” (Galatians 5: 1)

And so, gracious, God, this morning we pray that the scales be lifted from our eyes, so that we can see and appreciate your greatest gift to us, our freedom. We ask for the courage to welcome and cherish that gift. We ask for the strength and the energy and the time to put it to good use. Most of all, we ask for the continued guidance in the exercise of that gift from the Holy Spirit of your beloved child, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.