

Homily for the 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

The past couple of weeks, I've been talking about how through the Scriptures God can speak personally to us. Well this week, the Gospel seems to give us some interesting financial advice: invest, invest, invest – at least that appears to be the case with the first two servants of that demanding master. We heard that upon taking a business trip, he entrusted one servant with 5 talents, another one with 2, and the third one with only 1. Now, according to my research, a talent was first off a measure of weight. Later, it was applied to currency, and it referred to the weight of a person in money, usually precious metals, like silver or gold – hence the phrase, “worth your weight in gold”. So, for a person weighing 100 lbs, and silver presently valued at under \$17.02 per ounce, one talent of silver would be valued at \$27,232 – and 5 talents would be worth over \$136,000. This is no chump change that this master was entrusting to these servants. So, when it came down to that third servant who buried that \$27k rather than invest it, perhaps we can better understand the *fear* that he had.

Fear is an interesting word – one that's used in our Scripture readings several times today. We first heard it used in the Book of Proverbs, which speaks so beautifully about the treasure that an honorable and faithful wife is. And after listing such wonderful qualities as worthy, good, hard working, and generous, the reading ends by saying that “the woman who *fears* the LORD is to be praised.”

Now, we hear that expression “fear of the Lord”, and I don’t know about you, but for a long time, it just didn’t make sense to me. I mean, if our God is a loving Father who created each one of us in His image and likeness, then why should we be afraid of Him? Adding to the confusion, elsewhere in the Book of Proverbs, we hear that “fear of the Lord is the first stage of wisdom”! So are we supposed to be afraid of God? Well no – that is, if by fear we mean a servile kind of dread, in which we serve God simply because we’re afraid He’s going to punish us – either in this life, or in the life to come. God’s doesn’t want us to dread Him. But I think that that servant who buried his talent in the ground had this type of fear toward his master. In a sense, out of fear he was paralyzed not to do anything, being terrified of losing that money. And how would he explain *that* to his demanding master who would definitely punish him?

I suspect, my friends, that most of us probably don’t relate to the Lord in such a way where we cower before Him as a vengeful God breathing smoke. Such a way of fearing the Lord almost makes the Gospel seem irrelevant or out of touch with reality – like who’s really going to cringe or belittle himself before God? “That might have been OK in the Old Testament”, we say to ourselves, “but it just doesn’t make sense for us today.”

But while we might not fear *the* Lord in such a way, perhaps there are other lords in our lives that we do fear in this way. Maybe there are things in our lives that we treat with a servile fear – things that we keep locked away, hidden in the shadows, deep down, out of the conscious light of our minds and hearts – things that we make “masters” in our lives – things that we give power to. They’re different for everyone. Maybe for you it’s wanting to be liked or popular – you don’t like yourself, so you try whatever you can to be accepted by others, even if it’s not acceptable to you. Or maybe it’s fear of disappointing others – you don’t want others to be mad at you, so you think it’s better just to do whatever other people want you to do all the time. Or maybe it’s your sexuality – you’re not sure how to love others in healthy ways, so you try to grab that feeling of being connected in unhealthy ways. And, there are many others. But, the point is, that we can treat such things as lords in our lives. We know there are problems or difficulties, but instead of talking about them with someone or bringing them before God in prayer, we keep them bottled up in the lonely darkness inside.

But this is not God’s plan for us. We are His beloved children. And like any good parent He wants the best for His children. As St. Paul tells us today, “we are children of the light.” We are not children of the darkness. We don’t need to hide our struggles and burdens and pretend like we can deal with such false masters on our own – with our own strength, on our own time.

Rather, we need to shine the light of faith on them – and bring them to God.

We must realize that God is God, and we are not. He alone deserves to be the sole master in our lives – nothing else. And while it's true that He is the almighty, all-powerful creator of heaven and earth, who is worthy of demanding all our worship, at the same time, He's also the triune God of love, who desires the best for His children, and wants us to freely return that love to Him. And He doesn't want anything to keep us from Him. This is what a true biblical understanding of "fear of the Lord" consists of – being in awe of such an all-powerful God, who humbles Himself out of love for us.

And so, my brothers and sisters, a genuine relationship with God is based on love, not on dread, and not on anything else. Therefore, to say "we fear the Lord" means that we have such a reverence and a devotion to God that we don't want to offend Him; and so we try to do all that we can to please Him. It also means that we don't hide parts of ourselves from Him. And because He is who He is, we can boldly come before Him, and open up to Him, without being afraid, because He loves us just as we are. God bless you.