

Using Our Talents
11/19/17

As we near the end of the church year, it should come as no surprise that we hear about the end of the world and Jesus returning for the second and last time. So, it was pretty appropriate, a bit funny but also eye-opening when I read the following post on Facebook last week. I don't remember it exactly and couldn't find the post when I looked for it, but in essence it said: if there's a stairway to heaven and a highway to hell, it says a lot about the traffic. Yes, it's sort of funny but I sure hope it turns out the highway is to heaven and not the stairway.

If you were here last week, you heard me talk about being prepared and in that context, I told a story about St. Charles Borromeo playing cards. He was asked what he would do if he knew this was to be his last night on earth? He said he would keep playing cards, an unusual answer yet one that said to his companions that he was ready for the end, no matter when it came.

Today's Gospel is about both fear and trust. Dominican Laurie Brink talks about being the executor of her grandfather's estate. The attorney commented on how faithfully her grandfather saved money. He also noted that having lost everything in the 1929 crash, her grandfather would only make the safest investments. Grandpa feared losing everything again.

Likewise, the third servant admits to his fear because the master was a demanding person, a man who harvested where he did not plant and gathered where he did not scatter. On the surface, the fear doesn't seem so bad; after all, sometimes it's okay to be afraid. But when we reflect on the message Jesus is trying to convey, we realize it's about how the other two servants used the talents more so than the fear of the third.

Another Dominican, John Cameron, suggests that we can therefore conclude the master is not out to multiply his fortune – if that were the case, he would have given all of the talents to the first servant. And the master does not have to go away in order for the story to make sense. No, the parable, according to Cameron,

is about trust. By leaving the servants well-off and unsupervised, the master allows the servants to act in freedom.

We have to remember how much trust the master had in giving such sizable sums to his servants. Interesting that the money did not go to bankers or brokers, but to servants. And you probably have heard before that the sums given to the servants amounted to hundreds of thousands of dollars in today's terms. In fact, the money given was sufficient for these men to buy their way out of servitude and now that the master was gone, they had the perfect chance.

But when the master returns, he doesn't want to keep the newly gained income. All he wants is for the faithful servants to share his joy. He has trusted their ability to use the talents wisely. After all, the servants did not know they were going to be able to keep what was given to them, much less the return on the investment.

In a similar way, God gives each of us gifts and just like the servants, we are given different gifts; it's up to us how we use them. We are not to hoard them, to bury them in the ground. That would be as silly as hiding a lamp under a bushel basket. Let me conclude with a story Jim Abbott using the talent he was given, when it appeared there was no talent available.

Jim was born with no left hand. What if Jim was watching a baseball game and asked his parents if he would ever be able to play? How would they answer him? Well, they instilled the drive and will to succeed, such that he went on to play several seasons with the New York Yankees, even pitching a no-hitter. Jim Abbott trusted he could do well with the talent God entrusted to him.

St. Augustine's rule for community life advises that we give according to our ability and take according to our need. The ability and need will change over time, depending on the circumstances we face. However, if we lose our fear and come to complete trust in God, we will live as Augustine suggests, giving what we can and taking what we need. It's as simple as that. And maybe if enough of us do that, we'll make that highway to heaven a multi-lane expressway.