All Saints’ Church 24 Pentecost

November 19, 2017 Year A

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Psalm 90: 1-8, [9-11], 12 Matthew 25:14-30

Thank you dear Lord for all the ways you invite us to inwardly digest your Holy Word.

There’s a little placard that hangs on my kitchen door. A friend gave it to me; I don’t remember the circumstances. I’ve had it for over 30 years and it follows me anytime I move, and it always has a prominent place in my home- in the Rectory it hangs on one of the doors into the kitchen.

I stumble upon it daily: “God put me on earth to do a few things. I’m so far behind I’ll never die!”

It always makes me laugh at myself, especially at any tendency to think I might be indispensable. ***Think again***. Or that God, like Santa Claus, is keeping track (you better watch out) of my “few things.” ***Not really***. Or that I might be immune from illness or a sudden and terminal diagnosis, and that my relatively healthy body will stay heathy forever and that death, though inevitable, is far off in the distance. ***Hmmm, maybe not.*** We have no idea what tomorrow will hold, no matter how much we think we do!

We’re all human and sometimes we have to be reminded that our efforts to make a difference, to care for our friends and family, to create something new, to fix a growing problem, or to find solutions are all good, with feelings of love, valor and honor, but we are often not in control, if ever, and that the gift of change or progress or success is tied with a big ribbon of God’s grace.

It’s not all up to us. Sometimes this need for humility is really difficult to wrap our heads around.

Then this placard, this sign, becomes a salve, a wake-up call, as a reminder that the only thing I can do, we can all do, is to be in the moment and to do the best we can with what’s before us. And that those thousands of things on some imaginary list, and sometimes not so imaginary list (just look at my desk) …

Those things, some precious, some mundane, sometimes few, sometimes many, we need to give over to God, knowing that we’re doing everything we can to enter into life with ***passion, presence and prayer.***

And those many balls we’re desperately trying to keep in the air? .... Some will drop and bounce away, some explode, some disappear and there’s not a darn thing we can do.

Multi-tasking and fixing is not next to god-li-ness. Living and giving and forgiving and letting go and praying and loving and being and breathing are next to god-li-ness. The glory of God is a human being fully alive (thank you Ignatius), or as Sandi preached last week, the sacrament of our everydayness is a human being fully awake.

Our Collect this morning reminds us that we live within the Holy Word of Scripture. I think our gospel story this morning reflects the wisdom of being fully awake and in the moment.

A rich property owner calls his slaves before going on a long journey and entrusts them, one, with 5 talents, another 2, and to another 1, each according to his or her own ability, to do what they need to do. Each talent is worth about 15 years of labor, so no small amount of money. In fact, it’s an outrageous amount. Notice the property owner gives no instructions.

All three slaves are heroes. I know that the man who buries the one talent in the ground is thought to be the bad guy, but in many parts of the world he is the courageous one. In South Africa he is a man to emulate.

I was in an all-Black church in the middle of a Zulu village, and the gospel was being proclaimed in the middle of the nave, just as we do. The priest reading got to the part, “Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. ***Here*** you have what is yours.’” And with that, the congregation already standing, began to cheer and shout and stomp their feet- with fists in the air. Talk about waking up- I was shocked. The priest waited patiently and then when folks had their say, he finished reading the gospel.

And then the priest preached on the courage of the third man, mostly for my sake, because everyone else understood that the man who buried the talent was brave and faithful, even risking being thrown into the outer darkness. He refused to live within a corrupt system, and it comes with its risks.

Even though he was given more money than God, he wanted nothing to do with it, because it had all been acquired by greed, corruption, and abusive power- all within a system that rewarded those landowners who created the system and punished those slaves who were enslaved by it. There are no “good landowners” in this scenario. And so the slave buried the corrupted money and then returned it- washing his hands clean of ever being tempted to engage.

Inwardly digesting the Holy Word is all about context and being awake in the moment. Apartheid was being dismantled, and in the midst of the chaos, there were many opportunities to take advantage- to make money at the expense of the community- a temptation for all, both Black and White. Very corrosive.

The preacher closed his sermon with, “What profit is there in gaining the whole world if you lose or forfeit yourself in the process?” (Lk. 9:25) and then the congregation applauded in response.

As you can imagine, I can’t read this gospel without thinking of my experience with this South African interpretation. That’s why all three slaves are heroes. Yet, it’s not just the third slave who rebelled against exploitation who is honorable. The first two slaves who take risk, who trust, who trade, who engage are also examples of living a full life under God’s banner.

In his Inaugural speech, President Nelson Mandela spoke eloquently about burying talents because of fears:

“We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be. You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn’t serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We were all born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.”

That’s why we read Jesus’ stories as parables and not allegories- the levels of interpretations and nuance and ambiguity are multi-faceted, and even paradoxical. There’s no one interpretation. And that’s a good thing- liberating as we inwardly digest the Holy Word. We need to include our brothers and sisters in South Africa and the rest of the world, in the inwardly digesting, as they include us. That’s what we mean when we say, We are the Body of Christ.

This does not mean that every interpretation of the gospel is true.

Any interpretation that excludes, denigrates, shames, make one feel less than, trades on guilt, names some of us as blessed others of us as damned, vilifies God, abuses you as different, and rejects and maligns the disenfranchised…. And they are out there…. Those interpretations are not made with God’s dream for the world in mind.

Remember all those balls in the air that I alluded to in the beginning. We get to add one more- how to interpret gospel as the good news, as words of hope and healing. We can’t do this alone.

We need each other; we need to trust in our humility, not in our fixing or our moralizing. We need to rely on our ***passion, presence and prayer*** as guides as we learn to live in our soul, not as a thing, but as a quality of how we experience life and each other…. With justice, value, depth, integrity, risk-taking, love and compassion, knowing that all our acts are tied together with a big ribbon of God’s grace.

AMEN