

“Settling Accounts”

- 33rd Sunday
- November 15, 2020
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

We are getting toward the end of our liturgical year. Next week is the culminating Sunday of Christ the King of the Universe, and the following Sunday we start a new liturgical year with the First Sunday of Advent. The readings now are about the end times. I believe the reason we have this familiar parable of the talents as our gospel today is that it speaks of a master who settle accounts, alluding to God settling accounts in the last judgment, the decisive standing before God before entering the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps as Americans we think of this parable of the talents too much as a question of achievement, either the investing of the money given by the master to each servant or the full use of our talents, or abilities, putting them to use for achievements. We need to pay closer attention as the parable may say something much more important than that.

The master “entrusts his possessions” to the servants. What is the “possession” of God that God entrusts to us and on which God will call us to account? Isn’t it that our life itself comes from God, that what we are entrusted with is life, a share in the very life of God from whence all life flows? Then the question becomes, not how do we invest, or what do we achieve or accomplish, but how fully or little do we live the life we are given by God. God calls us to account for whether or not we live our God-given, God-owned, God-possessed life fully, not in the misleading sense of coming to fulfillment but in the true sense of using the greatest, precious, unique good given to each of us to the fullest by spending it in a life of loving, giving, caring, praising, thanking, service. That is the first important point: have we magnified our life by how we have lived it; or have we wasted the life we are given by God by burying it?

I think the other very important point of this parable is how these servants—how we—look on God. To the first two, in settling the account with them for how well they have used what they have been given, the master says, “Come, share your master’s joy.” Are we being told not only that God takes joy in how they have lived their God-given lives, that God is a God who shares joy, but that these two servants were able to risk all in living the God-possessed life they were given because they knew they served a God of joy? They looked on God as a God of joy, a God who seeks to rejoice in his people, who takes joy in us. No wonder they could spend their life so fully knowing that the God who gave them life and would hold them to account was a God of joy.

The third servant, who does not use the gift, but buries it; how does that servant see the master? He says, “I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering what you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your (possession) in the ground.” If he sees the master as a hard taskmaster, then of course he would be cautious, afraid, unwilling to risk, playing safe with what was given to him. Are we being asked how we see God? Whether we see God as a demanding taskmaster and so play safe with the precious gift of life God has given us, or as a God who seeks to have his joy in us and so we are able to be

magnanimous, large-souled, unafraid in living our lives fully and generously before him? Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of this parable presented to us on this “settling accounts” Sunday of our liturgical year.

If we bring these two points together that the possession of God given to us is nothing less than the unique life given to each of us and to no one else in the same way to be fully lived and that we are freed up to live it fully, generously, unafraid if we know the One from whom we receive it and to whom we return it is not a demanding taskmaster but a God eager to rejoice over us, then it is not important whether we accomplish big things in life or not, nor whether in life we are fulfilled in our feelings or not. It only matters that we live the life we are given as it is, willingly, acceptingly, gladly for God, for God’s joy not ours.

No one says this better than the English Carmelite nun, Ruth Burrows, who at the age of 97 is now fully but painfully living the last of her life in a nursing home near her monastery. She shares with Mother Teresa a many-decades-long interior darkness of not seeing God. She spends the one life she was given and does so in faith, believing that God is joy, and that her life—though dark for her—is joy for God. She expresses this so well in a poem called “A Garden for God”. She says better than I what I have been trying to say the Gospel of today most importantly means.

I made a garden for God.
 No, do not misunderstand me
 It was not on some lovely estate or even in a pretty suburb.
 I made a garden for God
 in the slum of my heart
 a sunless space between grimy walls
 the reek of cabbage water in the air
 refuse strewn on the cracked asphalt....
 the ground of my garden!
 This was where I laboured
 night and day
 over the long years
 in dismal smog and cold.....
 there was nothing to show for my toil.
 Like a child I could have pretended:
 my slum transformed.....
 an oasis of flowers and graceful trees
 how pleasant to work in such a garden!
 I could have lost heart
 and neglected my garden
 to do something else for God.
 But I was making a garden for God
 not for myself
 for his delight not mine
 and so I worked on in the slum of my heart.
 Was he concerned with my garden?
 Did he see my labour and tears?

I never saw him looking
never felt him there
Yet I knew (though it felt as if I did not know)
that he was there with me
waiting.....
He has come into his garden
Is it beautiful at last?
Are there flowers and perfumes?
I do not know
the garden is not mine but his—
God asked only for my little space
to be prepared and given.
This is 'garden' for him
and my joy is full.