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Our Scriptures were formed through a process of experience, reflection and oral tradition that was eventually written down, all under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Keeping that in mind, we might listen to today's readings as if hearing the oral tradition, as if we were younger disciples listening to our predecessors. Imagine that we're hearing some of the elders who walked with Jesus and heard him weave parables to suit every occasion. These people also knew Paul and the communities he founded.

Suppose we've been sitting around talking about how things are going in the world. As winter looms, we're discussing the signs that make us think our world may not last too much longer. We know the litany: global warming, nuclear proliferation, lack of response to the plight of refugees, masses of people affected by famine, terrorism . Like the early Christians, we feel that Jesus has gone on too long a journey. Some people think he's coming back soon, others say it's too late.

One of the elders reminds us that Paul went through all of that with his communities. Every time folks like the Thessalonians started questioning if they could keep on, every time they tried to pin God down to a time schedule, Paul reminded them that nobody knows when the end will come. He told them not to get too worried, but not to get too comfortable either. A disciple sitting in the back mumbles, "God doesn't

give us timetables, but possibilities."

With that, another raises an eyebrow and launches into the parable about the master who left his servants in charge of his fortune while he went away. He gave one servant five million dollars, he gave another two million and a third had to be content with a measly million.

Then, instead of repeating the whole story, our evangelist turns to us and says: "Why are you sitting around grousing and speculating about things you can't control or even guess at? Have you any idea of what you've been given to work with? What are you doing with your millions?"

At this point, one of the women chimes in and asks, "And what do you think is the point of the story? Do you think it's about how much work the servants did? Do you think it's about the profit they made, the risks they took? No, my friends, it's about what they learned and who they became by doing or by ignoring the master's work."

Then, all the elders start speaking at once — and amazingly, they all agree about the parable's message. The point of the story, they tell us, is that two servants learned to love doing what the master did. They had seen him at work and learned to do it the way he did. They even replicated what he had given them. What a surprise to them when the master hardly paid attention to the money but said "Well done! ... Now come share my joy."

Our elders would have us understand that the master in the story isn't really interested in the money and that God, the Master wants us to experience what the business of this life is all about. Servants who imitate his way of working get caught up in his way of living. By the time the master returns, the servants are already sharing in his joy.

Pity those who refuse to get involved. Given much, they choose not to enjoy it. Unlike servants who respond with gratitude for the opportunities they receive, the unwilling see everything with suspicion. Refusing the trust they are given, they put the master's offer in a grave, suffocating their own potential. As those who get involved in the master's work begin to share his joy even before he returns, the others are grinding their teeth in the darkness even before it's time to render an account.

If we want to imagine the daily life of a joyful servant, we can look to our reading from the Book of Proverbs. The person our translation calls a “worthy wife” is literally described as a “woman of strength” or valiant woman. She is the ideal Israelite. She takes all she has been given, does more with it, and dedicates everything she has and is to the good of those who need her. She is a hard worker, but there is no hint that she feels imposed upon or compelled. She enjoys what she does and that brings joy to others. Following her example, we can learn how to relish the millions of moments that make up the time of our life.

### **PROVERBS 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31**

Praise of the valiant woman brings the Book of Proverbs to its end. The entire poem, Proverbs 31:10-31, makes an acrostic, a poetry form in which the first word in each verse begins with the successive letters of the alphabet. In addition to being entertaining and an aid for memorization, the acrostic form implies that the poem says everything there is to say about its subject, from A to Z, Alpha to Omega, Alef to Tav. By putting this poem at the end of the Book of Proverbs, the authors were suggesting that all the wisdom they had collected from their tradition came to its apex in the woman described here.

The valiant woman does everything that a faithful Israelite should do. No arm candy is this one, nor is she a couch potato. She knows what to do with wool, and she is an expert at finding the best for her family when she goes to market. No one goes hungry around her, and she is the first to show others how to work. She enjoys the fruits of her labor, but doesn’t keep them for herself or her own.

The poem creates an inspiring image as it describes her generosity. This woman “reaches out her hands to the poor,” implying that she is there to lift them up and give of what she has. Then, going much further it says, “She extends her arms to the needy.” She actually embraces those who are languishing. This worthy woman cares for the body and soul of those who need her. Because of that, her husband can entrust his heart to her, and he commands respect among the elders who sit at the city gate. She makes things good for him at home and in public.

The poem tells us three key things about her relationship with God (See verses 25, 26, 30). She opens her mouth in wisdom, meaning that she speaks from discernment and knows God in her heart. Second, she fears the Lord, which means that she stands in holy awe of God’s majesty. Third, because she fears the Lord,

"she laughs at the days to come." She is content to do all she can to provide for those who need her while trusting God for the rest.

While we may think of the Hebrew culture as marked by male chauvinism, this reading describes the woman who is like the just man praised in Psalm 1. The just man is like a tree planted near running waters. The worthy woman is an image of the God who created her, and she will see her works praise her at the city gates.

## **1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-6**

As Paul begins this section of his letter, he gets his audience's attention by praising them: "You surely don't need to be reminded of what I am going to say. You all know it well." When we hear something like that, we perk up our ears either to be reinforced in what we really do know or to play a little catch-up, to hear it and then say, "Sure, I know that." Beginning his message in that way was a subtle way of saying, "This is really important. Act like you know it only too well!" With that attention grabber, Paul goes on to talk about the day of the Lord.

In the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, the day of the Lord was the day of judgment, the day when God would vindicate the just. The Thessalonians apparently wanted to know when this was going to come about. They were looking for signs of it. They may well have been listening to the apocalypticists, the folks who predicted the end by using mysterious scriptures and their own interpretation of what was happening around them.

In response to self-proclaimed prophets who purported to read the heavens or politics and shouted: "The day is nigh!" Paul says, "You know that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." He's reminding them that nobody knows when it is going to happen. No thief shows up on schedule nor do house-robbers send text messages with suggestions like, "Leave the window open and your wallet on the kitchen table."

In a sense, Paul is saying "You never know what is going to happen." When people think all is well, "sudden disaster comes upon them." So, what is the Christian to do? Paul says, "You are children of the light." You have learned to see what life is all about. "Stay awake, alert to what you know and all will be well." There is a way in which we could take Paul's injunction to stay alert and sober as an imitation of the worthy woman who can laugh at tomorrow. We cannot know what will happen

tomorrow, nobody knows when the day of the Lord will arrive. Nevertheless, we can keep on keeping on. We can walk in the way of light knowing which road to stay on, accepting the fact that we can't predict exactly when we will reach the destination.

## **MATTHEW 25:14-30**

All three readings this week ask us what we are doing with the time of our life. The worthy woman is a model of God's faithful ones who go about doing good in every circumstance. Paul addresses a community anxious for predictions and tells them not to worry about the end but rather about the way they were living day to day. If they live as children of the light, they have nothing to worry about. With that preparation, we come to Jesus' parable of the talents. Here we have the question of what we do with the time and circumstances of our lives, but also very directly the question of why we do what we do and what it has to do with God.

The situation Jesus sets up is imaginable in spite of its fantastic dimensions. The people listening to Jesus could envision a wealthy businessman who had a plethora of servants. Some servants would typically be left in charge of the household, etc. Some others would be well prepared and able to carry on the master's work. The latter were the specially chosen ones, the ones who had a knack for the master's business.

When the master was going somewhere, he gave his servants charge of everything. In this case, he handed over a good portion of his fortune to the specialists in his business so that they could continue his work. Nobody should feel too sorry for the servant who received the least — what he got was in the realm of a million dollars. What he did was not unimaginable under the circumstances. Where there were no banks one could keep money safe by hiding it; a secret burial place was very secure. The factor which made all the difference was that he didn't like his master enough to care about what he did for him.

The trouble was that the servant didn't do what the master wanted. The master himself could have buried the money or even put it in the bank! It was as if the master had given this servant seeds to use while he was gone and the servant put them carefully in a cupboard, saying that he was keeping them safe from floods, droughts or a plague of locusts.

The master handed his fortune over to his servants so that they could keep his business going. Those who did so not only increased the master's fortune, but they became more like him as they did his work, as they carried forth his mission. When the master returned, he didn't look at the amounts and rejoice more for a return of five talents than for the return of two. To both of those servants he said, "Come, share your master's joy," which was another way of saying, "Come to my feast!"

The whole truth came out when the servant who had received a mere one million reported in. Before he ever spoke of what he did, he told the master what he thought of him: "You are demanding, you harvest what you did not plant, you go for everything you can get. So I decided to have nothing to do with your projects. Look, I return to you exactly what you gave me, nothing more nothing less." In effect that servant was saying, "I want nothing to do with your endeavors." While the story says that the master ordered that he be thrown out, that was no more than the logical conclusion of a process the servant himself had set in motion. He had already chosen to exclude himself from the master's business. If he wouldn't take part in the master's plan, it was impossible for him to share the master's joy.

Today's readings remind us that everything we have is a gift from God given so that we may know God's joy. Each of us must then decide what to make of the time of our lives.

## **Planning: 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's Gospel passage is well-known and led to our common use of the word *talent* to mean a special ability. In biblical times, a talent was a measure of weight as well as a unit of value equivalent to that weight of a precious metal. So, the parable is really about investing money, but it led to using the word to mean ability.

Planners might focus more on that adapted use of the term than on investment issues. The Lectionary seems to do this, as well. Note that the first reading speaks of the abilities of a good wife, not of money or investing. While some modern feminists might quibble today with the abilities it highlights, the passage points us toward considering the abilities we need for the celebration of the liturgy.

Planners might discuss together the various liturgical ministries currently employed in the parish worship. With each, consider how well the ministry is being fulfilled, what problems may have arisen with that ministry, what kind of training is offered to those entering the ministry, what continuing formation is offered, and whether enough people have stepped forward (or been invited) to serve in the ministry. You might also review the list of people involved to see if it is really representative of the wider parish community. Are various ethnic groups included? Are young people invited to share the ministry? Are those with various disabilities enabled to serve according to their abilities?

Another potentially useful discussion revolves around how liturgical ministers are chosen in the parish. Is anyone who volunteers accepted into any ministry automatically? Are there qualifications that need to be met? Is the training for the ministry designed in a way that reveals whether someone can fulfill the ministry well or not? This may be most evident when we train lectors or cantors, but every ministry requires particular abilities and attitudes. While we certainly want to encourage everyone to volunteer, placing them in a ministry for which they are not well-suited does a disservice to both the volunteers and the parish.

One way to begin to address this issue is to start talking about discerning with any volunteers what their personal gifts are and how they can best be put to use for the good of the whole community. Someone who volunteers to be a cantor may not have the vocal skill for that ministry but may be able to serve well as a member of the choir or perhaps as a lector. Someone who has difficulty with proclaiming clearly and with meaning may be able to serve quite well as a eucharistic minister. Someone with mobility limitations may not be able to fulfill all the tasks of an usher, but may still be able to serve well as a greeter before and after the liturgy.

## **Prayers: 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

### **Introduction**

The closing of the church year is an opportunity for deep reflection. We hear advice again today about paying attention and planning for what will inevitably come in each of our lives. Our readings speak of wisdom, courage and using the strengths and gifts given. As Thanksgiving and the onslaught of the coming holiday season

collide, this may be a good time to take a breath, step back, and think about what really matters.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you taught your disciples the importance of being prepared: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you showed them that preparedness requires responsibility: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you tell us how to be wise and faithful servants: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray, my friends, for the will to be the people we are called to be.

**Minister** For the whole church, that we may respond to the challenge given to us by Christ ... we pray,

- For leaders who do not use their gifts for the prosperous future of the whole human community ... we pray,
- For those who do not appreciate or trust the gifts they have been given ... we pray,
- For counselors and therapists, teachers and coaches, parents and mentors who work to support those who live in fear ... we pray,
- For programs and policies that create new skills and strengths to replace those no longer needed ... we pray.
- For grateful hearts as we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, and for those who feel they have little to be thankful for ... we pray,
- For all in this community who need help or encouragement, especially the sick or lonely, the discouraged or depressed ... we pray,
- For all who have died ... (*names*) ... and for those who grieve for them ... we pray,

**Presider** Generous God, you are the giver of all that we have. Give us the vision, courage and strength to use our gifts to benefit others. In the dark times of the year, we pray that we may be people of light. We humbly ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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