

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Amy Foster
November 19, 2017

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalm 90:1-8, 12

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Prayer: O God, open our hearts and minds to hear your word and reveal it in our lives. Amen.

If you're anything like me, you probably feel like you have a pretty good sense of the parable of the talents that we heard in today's gospel. We often hear this parable in conjunction with stewardship campaigns—the story is a reminder to use and invest our gifts and resources, rather than to hide them away, so that we might enrich and benefit our community and spread God's love. What a sweet little story.

But, again, if you're like me, you may be surprised when you actually read this parable again and realize that it ends with weeping and gnashing of teeth. The master in the parable –whom we usually equate with God--is seemingly quite harsh, and the punishment for that poor slave who was just trying to be careful and conservative seems extreme. I'll admit, I was more than a little tempted to ignore all this "weeping and gnashing of teeth" as I prepared for today's homily, but the rest of today's lections simply wouldn't allow that!

For instance, in the psalm, despite the somewhat poetic language about God as our refuge and the sweep of God's vision, it also says: "For we consume away in your displeasure; we are afraid because of your wrathful indignation. Our iniquities you have set before you, and our secret sins in the light of your countenance."

And the other two readings are even more direct. 1Thessalonians and Zephaniah both describe a future, but rather imminent, "day of the Lord" that will be a time of upheaval, coming, as Paul says, "like a thief in the night." Paul is anticipating Jesus' return, but the image of a thief sneaking up on us in the middle of the night is just plain scary. Zephaniah is also describing a time of judgment, and his description is even more vivid and frightening than Paul's. In Zephaniah's time, the "Day of the Lord" had traditionally been understood as a day of joy and triumph, but Zephaniah was warning his seventh century B.C. audience that their complacency and lack of concern for God's law would bring not triumph, but tragedy. He says, "I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the LORD...neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them."

Whew. So, you see, we can't just ignore all this weeping and gnashing of teeth—we see it throughout scripture, and, just as importantly, we see it throughout our world today. There *is* a

lot of suffering, and as Christians we *cannot* turn a blind eye to it. So what can we make of the warnings in all of the readings today? Do we just sit around and wait for this “day of the Lord?” Of course not! The whole point of a warning is to get people to take stock and change what they are doing, to realign their actions in accordance with what God truly hopes for us. These warnings remind us that *every* day is the day of the Lord, *every* day is a day in which our decisions and actions have consequences. God has reminded us of this again and again, through prophets, through the giving of the law that requires justice and mercy, and through the sending of his own son to reveal the way we should live. The “wrath” described in today’s readings is not about a God who sits up in heaven and sends literal fire and brimstone on people who sin. Instead, it reminds us that God has created a world in which we are accountable for our actions, and some pretty bad things happen when we ignore the fact that our actions have consequences, when we turn our backs on the message of love and compassion that God has sent us—*that’s* what these warnings are reminding us. These passages are about not about God’s wrath, but they are about God’s reality.

The reality that when we continue our unfettered consumption of fossil fuels, our climate changes and people suffer from more intense and deadly hurricanes and floods. The reality that when we do not use our voices and votes to insist on sensible gun laws, people die—even in churches. The reality that when we stay quiet about abuses of power, especially toward women and children, generations suffer in workplaces, and schools, and homes. The reality that when we neglect to share our resources, people will go to bed hungry.

The warning at the end of the parable of the talents reminds us that when we do not use the gifts of life and love that we have been given, we are all diminished, and our world suffers.

This is all sounding pretty grim, but the parable itself also reminds us of the ways in which our choices to act can have *positive* consequences. Remember, the first two slaves who invest the money entrusted to them find that it is multiplied, and they are rewarded for their efforts. This, too, is God’s reality—the reality that our choices to share our gifts and to act with justice and mercy have consequences, too. That every day we can make the “day of the Lord” a day of joy and triumph.

We see examples of this all around us. Today, the runners in the Turkey Trot right outside our door have chosen to use their gift of fitness to raise money for the many causes that the Kiwanis Club supports—their choice to run today will in turn benefit so many others. Today, people have brought food for Master’s Manna, and that choice will allow a child to eat well, and when people continue to make that choice, that child will not only feel satisfied, but will learn better in school and have a better chance at a good life. Every day, when we choose to speak up when we encounter injustice or we observe abuse, the result will be a more just world, and future generations that will no longer perpetuate abuse and its debilitating effects. Even the little choices we make each day—to be kind to someone who needs it, to apologize when we should, to share a little something with our neighbor—matter, because, as the parable reminds us, these investments will multiply and grow.

This week we will all celebrate Thanksgiving, a time to express gratitude for all the gifts we have been given. As we celebrate, let's use the parable of the talents to remember that a crucial part of demonstrating gratitude is to use, invest, and share what we have been given. If we can do this, with our choices both large and small, the consequence will be less "weeping and gnashing of teeth" and more justice and joy. This is what our scriptures tell us God hopes for – a "day of the Lord" that reveals a world of compassion, and justice, and peace.

In this spirit, let's close with a prayer written by Pauline Phillips, otherwise known as "Dear Abby":

"O Heavenly Father:

We thank Thee for food and remember the hungry.

We thank Thee for health and remember the sick.

We thank Thee for friends and remember the friendless.

We thank Thee for freedom and remember the enslaved.

May these remembrances stir us to service.

That Thy gifts to us may be used for others. Amen."