

Sermon for Nov. 15, 2020 - Parable of the Talents

I have hoped that these last two weeks of beautiful fall color and warm days would be a time for our nation to relax and celebrate one of our democratic hallmarks, the peaceful transfer of power after a highly contested election. A time to take a deep breath, and say, with relief, ‘It’s over.’ And it should be. Despite ongoing attempts to challenge the election, at least at the time of this recording, it’s over. And so going forward, no matter how you voted; no matter how welcome the results, or not, we face important questions beyond this ongoing wrangling and refusal to concede.

They are questions for all of us as Americans; perhaps they are also questions for each of us as an individual. Two of those questions, it seems to me, are these:

What now? or Where do we go from here?

Secondly, how do we use the gifts and talents we’ve got to get where we need to go?

And, as either my bad luck or the wisdom of the lectionary would have it, the appointed Gospel reading we just heard is known as the Parable of the Talents - a parable I find puzzling and difficult and almost impossible to interpret adequately. However, I think it definitely has a bearing on the second question, so I’ll get to that in due course.

But the first question - What now? looms large. David Ignatious and Sylvia Burwell were in conversation with Ledlie last Sunday about this at the Forum. And of course, we can read endless takes on this from our pundits and scholars and politicians and all who opine as to where we go from here - I guess that includes me. What now?

That question can be one of desperation, of fear, of complete uncertainty. How will our divided government function; how long before the virus is under control, how bad will the economy get, when can children go back to school. When will we have a vaccine? For many of us, personally, the what now? question revolves around our families and livelihoods, our own health and safety. What now? can keep us lying restlessly in bed at night, dreading more weeks and months of not knowing what’s going to happen.

On the other hand, what now? CAN be an optimistic question. We can ask it of a future that holds promise rather than dread. Despite all of our worries, we now have new opportunities as a country; we are hopefully almost rid of a level of toxic public rhetoric and free to once again embrace civility and dignity and compromise in our public life.

Whenever we face a new season, whether as a country or as individuals, What Now? can be life-giving. The novelist Ann Patchett expressed this so beautifully in a commencement address she gave some years ago at Sarah Lawrence College and then expanded into a short book. (If you remember me having used this quote before, you're right - even so, it bears repeating in this morning's context.)

Ann Patchett says "What now? is not just a panic-stricken question tossed out in a dark unknown. What now? can also be our joy. It is a declaration of possibility, of promise, of chance. It acknowledges that our future is open, that we may well do more than anyone expected of us, that at every point in our development we are still striving to grow. There's a time in our lives when we all crave the answers. It seems terrifying not to know what's coming next. But there is another time, a better time, when we see our lives as a series of choices, and What now? represents our excitement and our future, the very vitality of life. It's up to you to choose a life that will keep expanding. It takes discipline to remain curious; it takes work to be open to the world - but oh my friends, what noble and glorious work it is."

Yes, Ann Patchett - noble work for each of us, glorious work for our divided country. I pray we can respond to the What now? question more in hope than in fear, and more in strength and confidence than in doubt that we can make progress.

And that brings me to the second question: How do we use the gifts and talents we've got to get us where we need to go? Does the parable of the talents in the gospel help us here, or not? It seems a story about stewardship, about what use people make of what they're given to protect or increase its value. But at the same time, it seems a story about a very cruel master - one who rewards only those who enrich him and harshly punishes the one who, out of fear, does not. As I said before, I can't really offer an adequate interpretation.

But if we leave the horrible master out, (and certainly don't assume he represents God) we can better explore what the servants did with their talents, which in Jesus' time were worth a great deal of money. And let's think about talents as meaning not only the monetary kind in the story, but talents as the kinds of gifts and strengths we all have.

How do we invest ourselves as citizens; how best marshal the vast resources of our country to mark a pivot from our national turbulence? President-elect Biden and Vice-President elect Harris have encouraged us all to work together to bring the virus under control, and this work is indeed both policy as well as personal commitment - using knowledge and discipline and concern for the general welfare to get there. We know we need to somehow keep our economy afloat; again, legislation can bring about aid, but

myriads of opportunities exist as well for us as individuals, parishes or other communities to help our neighbors - with our time and our money. Although the election seemed to revolve around character more than specific policies, we now need to have and support policies that will address not only the virus, but racism, climate change, and immigration all heading the list.

There is so much to do, but in each area, like in the parable, different people or groups have different resources at their disposal. Those with great resources are in a position to do much; those with limited resources may indeed just strive to hang onto what they have - not necessarily to hide it away, as in the story, but certainly not to be penalized for protecting meager means. For instance, those at greater risk who choose to stay almost totally at home and do little but care for and protect their household from covid are to be respected - for them, caution is a gift they use well.

Sometimes, we find our resources coming from hardship or loss. Sometimes we manage find some new capacity or talent emerging from pain. The loss of a job can open us to a new career path; a miscarriage, as it did for me, can lead to an unexpected vocation; even a tragic death can lead to new commitment and purpose. For sure, these events aren't always blessings in disguise or silver linings - far from it! It's just that sometimes things that are very hard enable us to do things we never imagined.

Our situation now as a nation is one of great promise, great possibility in terms of what we are to do now that we will have new leadership. Our president-elect will not solve all our problems, nor will we as citizens rise up to change everything that this country needs to grow into the free and open democracy our founders envisioned. But we are at a hinge moment, a time of new beginnings. Like the servants in the parable, we are to be stewards of wealth received, be it great or small. Maybe it does go back to the young President Kennedy's inaugural question - "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country."

To help us answer the 2nd question - how do we use the gifts and talents we've got to get to where we need to go? we can look very carefully at all that is good in this country and in ourselves, certainly beyond material wealth. We can look to the values and ideals enshrined in our history even though we've fallen short of them - they are still part of our heritage, waiting to be fulfilled. Can we double our efforts, commit ourselves five fold? Can we be unwilling to accept what we have or to hide in the comfort of a remembered past? Can we step forward instead and do at least something to bring about needed change? Can we be bold in our stewardship of both national and personal resources?

And here I depart from the parable because I don't understand the master in that story. I don't accept his putting his people to a test only to enrich himself and brutally punishing the one whose fear prevents him from increasing his gift.

In faith, we look to a loving God, not a cruel and selfish master. And this God pours out grace, grace upon grace, giving us the natural world and our lives and the hearts and minds to live them in response to this grace. We are not challenged to measure up to harsh judgment - rather we are blessed and challenged to move forward in hope. I believe we now have political leaders fit for this challenge, and for that I give thanks. But real success depends on each of us, our willingness to trust and hope and work for a new and brighter day. What now? The future beckons. How do we get there? Our main gift is from God, and it is love. Our best stewardship of that love is to live it. Amen.