

Sermon for Sunday, November 16, 2008

The Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28)

By JoAnn Taylor

First Lesson	Joshua 4:1-7
Psalm	Psalm 123
Second Lesson	1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Gospel	Matthew 25:14-30

All glory to thee, O God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – now and for ever. Amen.

Some years ago, the treasurer of the New York Philharmonic Society came to make his annual pitch to noted philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. This was one of Carnegie's favorite charities and, as he had done in years past, he asked how much the total debt was. When he was told \$60,000, he sat down and began to write a check to cover the entire amount – but then Carnegie stopped and said, "Wait! Surely there are other music lovers in this city who could help out. Why don't you raise half this amount, and then come back to me for the other half?" The very next day, the treasurer came back beaming and told Carnegie that he had already raised the \$30,000 and would like to get Mr. Carnegie's check now. Andrew Carnegie was immensely pleased at this show of enterprise and immediately handed it over. But he was curious, "Who, may I ask, contributed the other half?" The treasurer answered, "Mrs. Carnegie!"

[pause]

Today's gospel has more than one interpretation and which one you use depends on the message you wish to convey. I'm going to try and provide a glimpse into the various messages that we hear in this reading. Given its placement in the lectionary, at the end of the church year, the interpretation is meant to be apocalyptic – a reference to the 'End Times'. What does the term 'End Times' mean to you? Most people when they hear those words believe they refer to the end of the world as we know it, and the second-coming of Christ. Many people look for the hidden messages to be found in the book of Revelations and apply them to today's world. It's nothing new. Scholars have been trying for centuries to accurately predict the end of the world. Events such as the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70AD, the Crusades, World Wars I and II, catastrophic natural disasters, and even the destruction of the twin towers on 9/11 have been used as signs that the end of the world is near. In each of those cases, the world as it was at that moment in time certainly ended. The people were witnesses to the end of an Age, the end of an Era, the end of a civilization, or the end of a way of life. {pause} The lesson in this interpretation is that God gives us many gifts and how we use those gifts will have a bearing on how we are met by Jesus on that last day. If we use our gifts wisely and well, then we will be met with joy and given even more to do in God's kingdom. But, if we are like the third servant and hoard our gifts – afraid to use them– then we will be denied entry into the kingdom. We will find ourselves in the outer darkness – alone - like the 5 foolish virgins who were denied access to the wedding banquet because they weren't prepared.

[pause]

In another interpretation, Jesus is once more pointedly calling the Scribes and Pharisees to task for their attitude regarding the Law and God. The Pharisees are the watchdogs – the keepers of the Law. It is their job to make sure the people live according to the letter of the Law – that every detail is obeyed. If the same method of raising cattle or sheep has been used successfully for a thousand years, then why change it – that is the mindset of a Pharisee. You don't fix it if it isn't broke – and you don't change the Law simply because you have found an easier or better way to do the same task.

Many of the daily tasks in any Jewish household were governed by strict ritual under the Law – and formed the basis for an entire way of life. The Pharisees wanted to keep things as they were - to protect their culture – no changes were allowed or welcome. {pause} Not an entirely bad thing, but their unwillingness to accept change – to take risks – or to try things that were new got them into trouble with God.

[pause]

In our gospel, the Master (God) takes the third servant to task because he is afraid to risk the talent given him and buries it. His failure to invest his talent meant no growth – the Master received back only what he had provided. That isn't the way God wants us to live. God wants us to take the talents and gifts we are given and creatively invest them so that we continue to grow and flourish. If we hoard a talent and don't use it, then we will soon lose the ability to use it – we will forget how to perform the task. If we continue to use our talent, then we will become more proficient, and our lives will become more productive – our responsibilities will become greater as we increase our gifts. {pause} The message here is there is no growth without risk. You can't grow an investment portfolio unless you risk investing in the stock market. You can't sell a product unless you risk the market by reaching out to those who might need what you have to offer. The treasurer in our opening story used some very creative fundraising in order to meet the goal set out for him by Andrew Carnegie. He used his talents wisely and well for the benefit of the Philharmonic Society.

[pause]

I believe elsewhere in the New Testament, we are told that we will not be judged in the hereafter based strictly on our works – that faith must also be present in our lives. Either way you look at this gospel reading, we are being told to use the gifts we have been given – to not let them grow idle or stagnant – because how we use our gifts, our talents and our treasures will have a bearing on our life with God. Now that doesn't mean only after we die – we also have a life – or should have a life with God here and now. God knows that faith and works go hand in hand – you really can't have one without the other. If you volunteer to work in a soup kitchen, but you don't enjoy the work, it will show in how you do your job and you will not receive the grace that should come with the experience. You may ask yourself the question, "How can I make a difference?" or "What talents or gifts do I have to share?" If those are questions you are asking yourself, then let me share a personal experience with you:

I have always enjoyed writing. I could write volumes on any subject – research any topic – but...if you asked me to stand up in front of a group – even a small group – I would have taken a failing grade in any class before I would do so. Talking in front of people terrified me to the point of making myself sick at the thought of doing so. My talent is writing – I can't speak for beans but I can write. Without a written page in front of me, I would probably preach the shortest homilies in existence – and not make any clear sense of the subject. It was a major step forward in faith for me to pursue a ministry as a Lay reader or Lay Eucharistic Minister, but to pursue a ministry as a Lay Preacher that was totally out of my comfort zone. Do I make a difference? I think I do. Each time one of you tells me how much you enjoy my articles in the Messenger or my homily on a given Sunday, you are telling me that I made difference. God wants us to enjoy the works we do in his name. Do I enjoy standing up here – absolutely? Is it easy – no? Do I sometimes let my emotions get the best of me – yes? But, it's all part of God's plan for me at this time and place – if it wasn't I wouldn't be here speaking to you right now.

[pause]

What I do through writing is try to reach out and touch you with my words – to convey the meaning of the gospel – or the memories of past experiences. When the choir sings, we share our love of music and worship with you. Lana gives us direction and support through her gifts as singer and musician. Some members of our choir share their gifts with our community as professional singers and

teachers. Do they make a difference? Yes. They make a huge difference because our lives would be very, very shallow without music to enhance our world.

[pause]

Right now, we here at Incarnation are working to explore our talents and gifts. Those talents have changed over the years – new talents have come and gone. We, like many other liturgical churches, are suffering the loss of our people and we are trying to find ways to attract them back and/or find new members to fill our pews. Perhaps, like the Pharisees, we became too fixed on keeping the old ways of doing things and have not always been open to new ideas. Part of being open to a new idea is commitment to that idea. I recently read a study which stated that churches or organizations that are seeking to grow often sabotage their efforts because they don't commit sufficient time to the changes taking place. We try new things, but if we don't get immediate results, then we turn our backs on that idea and move to something else and so on and so on. New ideas need time to take root – it might take a week, a month, a year or 5 years for the idea to bear fruit. In a day and age, where we expect instant gratification, we need to remember that we didn't get into this situation overnight and we can't get out of it overnight either. Careful and wise leadership is needed as well as the patience to wait for the seeds we plant to grow. It took 30 years for me to be able to stand here – small steps will grow into larger steps – small ministries will grow into larger ministries. Every Sunday, I notice faces in our sanctuary that are new. That may not mean a lot since I have a terrible time putting names with faces and remembering them – but it also might be a sign that people are showing interest in us. Whether or not they stay depends on how we make them feel about becoming part of our church family.

[pause]

Even though our gospel today is meant to be an apocalyptic message of preparation for the end of the world, I think it's most important meaning for us here is one of preparation for growth. God has provided us all with a variety of gifts – both temporal and spiritual – and he expects us to use them to the best of our ability – for the benefit of his kingdom. Growth means change. Change requires commitment, patience and perseverance. We are trying – we have people with vision who are taking steps to try new ideas – we need to commit to supporting them in their endeavors without pushing for instant results. Change is never easy – it can be painful and slow – but remember – no pain, no gain. God wants us to gain growth – to become a strong and active member of our community once more. We have been in the past and we can be again – but as I've said – it takes a lot of work. On December 8, 2008, it will be 100 years since the first worship services were held in this church building. The new year is our centennial year for this building. 2010 will see our processional cross reach its 100th birthday. We have many old and treasured traditions within these walls and we can have new ideas become part of our traditions into the next 100 years here.

[pause]

The End Times is a reference to the final days, hours or minutes of time – not just the end of a world, an age, an era or a civilization. It's the end of a season, a life, a relationship – anything that causes change in our lives can be an 'end time'. Like the servants in our gospel reading or the treasurer from the New York Philharmonic Society, we must use our gifts and talents for the benefit of God's kingdom on Earth. When we stand before God on the last day, we will be held accountable for our actions or lack thereof. No one knows the hour or the day – only God knows. We must be ready – we must be prepared. Amen.