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Deacon Travis Stephens, Homilist
Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31
1 Thessalonians 5:1-6
Matthew 25:14-30

33RD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
November 12-13, 2011

There is a story of a western town where a sheriff built a brand new jail. It was beautiful. It had big huge windows, tall ceilings and wide open spaces. There were no cells with bars in this jail. The sheriff caught his first criminal, but before he let him come in he got some red paint and dribbled it on the wooden floorboards. He brought the prisoner in and said I know what you're thinking, there are no bars in this jail and the windows are huge. It will be so easy to escape this place. Well go ahead and try—that's what the last prisoner thought. Two days later the prisoner was still there. He was held captive by his fear.

In today's Gospel, three servants are given talents. Two of them invest those talents and make a profit. And one hides the talent and makes no profit.

Now whenever we listen to a parable, we should always be asking ourselves what stands out as unexpected in this story. Parables are always telling a story about something common, but with a twist. There is always something that stands out as not quite making sense. But this is not always apparent to us, because we have heard the parables so many times. For instance, in the parable of the good shepherd, it doesn't make sense for a shepherd to leave his flock to find one missing sheep out of 99. It just doesn't make sense to put all the other sheep in danger for one.

So what is the twist in this parable? For Jesus' disciples, it would not have been that bad of an idea simply to hide the money in a box. Investing money back then was—as it is today—risky business. While you could earn interest by putting your money in the bank, you could also easily lose it. After all, there was no FDIC. If the bank was robbed or if it went under, your money was gone. Even today, some of us may think that putting our money in a box in the backyard is not all that bad of an idea.

So it wouldn't have made sense for Jesus to condemn the servant for hiding the talent in a safe place. But Jesus is not just talking about money. He is talking

about talents—the gifts which God gives to each and every person. Some are given more. Some are given less. No one is given the exact same talents as another person. But one thing is clear. We've all been given talents. And we can't just hide them away from everyone else.

Like the criminal in the jail without bars, the servant in this parable was paralyzed by fear, "I knew that you were a demanding person...so I went off and buried your talent in the ground." Who of us cannot relate to this poor servant's fear?

Today many are without work. Many have been without work for more than two years and don't know when—or even if—they will find a job. Many families are struggling from paycheck-to-paycheck simply to get by. There are people who have been diagnosed with life-threatening diseases like cancer, heart disease, or ALS; and they simply don't know how much time they have left. Some are struggling with chronic mental illness like depression or bipolar disorder. They may not know if they can afford their medication. And there are addicts, those who feel isolated and unlovable in their addiction, believing there is no hope for freedom.

Indeed, all of us, to a certain extent are afflicted by fear. From the beginning of sin in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve hid themselves from God, to Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane, to the people in this congregation fear troubles. As long as sin has been in the world people have been afflicted by fear. In a world with sin, it is a part of who we are.

Yet, Jesus calls us to a new freedom. His death and resurrection is God's last word for sin and fear. Today we have the privilege of experiencing that word in a unique way through the sacrament of baptism. Through the sacrament of baptism we enter into Christ's death and resurrection. Original sin and personal sin are washed away, the Holy Spirit enters the heart of the newly baptized, and they become a brand new member of the Church.

Infant baptism, in particular, highlights the sheer gratuitousness of salvation. A baby is not guilty of personal sin, nor is a baby free to choose salvation. Nonetheless, it is freely offered. And it reminds us that we can never earn our salvation. But, through the decisions of our life, we can choose to accept the gift of salvation or to reject it.

Through the sacraments—including baptism and the Eucharist—God empowers us to transcend the fear which binds us. We are strengthened to offer our gifts and

talents to the community of the Church in spite of whatever fear may make us hesitate.

Over the past few weeks I have had the privilege of getting to know the staff here at Epiphany. I have to say that I have never seen a parish that offers so many opportunities for people to put their gifts and talents to work for the church and community. There are literally hundreds of opportunities. So it would be hard—if not impossible—for anyone to say that “there is no where for me to use my talents.”

Ultimately, the challenge for all of us is to overcome the fear of offering our self more completely for the good of the Church. Paradoxically, in offering ourselves to the Church, we are also accepting God’s gift of salvation. As we continue this celebration of the Eucharist, may Christ empower us to overcome our fears and to hold nothing back from loving God remembering: If God is for us, who can be against us?