

Early in the school year two young parents received a call from their son's principal. The principal asked if they could come to his office to discuss their son's behavior in school. Nervously, they went. When they got there, the principal told them their son would have to be put in a different class. His teacher was unable to run the class properly as long as their son was in it. "The problem is," the principal told the parents, "your son doesn't belong in first grade." The parents felt their worst fears were about to be realized. The principal went on, "He belongs in at least the fifth grade. He should probably even be in a special school. You see, we did some tests and we've determined that your son is gifted."

What parents wouldn't want to hear that about their child? The thing is, though, we say that a child who is particularly bright and can perform academically at a level far above his or her age group is gifted, as if that meant that only a few people are gifted. True, not everyone can be a Phi Beta Kappa. There is only one LeBron James, only one Mozart, only one Einstein. Certain people stand out because they have particularly noticeable gifts, and because they have made the most of their special gifts and talents. On the other hand, the Christian faith teaches us that all of God's children have received gifts from Him, gifts that He means for us to make the most of as well.

Each time we say the *Confiteor* at Mass, we come before Almighty God and admit to Him that we have sinned against Him in our thoughts and in our words, by what we have done and ... *by what we have failed to*

*do*. For the most part, we expect that when we knowingly and deliberately do wrong we are guilty before God and need to confess and repent of our transgressions. It seems natural that when we examine our consciences and our daily lives in an effort to make our confession to God as real and sincere and effective as we can, we tend to confess the things that we've done wrong.

However, in the Gospel reading for this Sunday morning, condemnation falls upon the person who apparently hasn't done anything morally wrong. He hasn't broken any promise, he hasn't lied or misrepresented himself. It's not at all clear that he has directly broken any commandments or moral precepts.

And yet the master calls him *wicked*. It may be that the master is angered by this servant's disparaging characterization of him. Maybe the master doesn't like being called a hard man, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not winnow.

But that's not it. The master is angered because the third servant held the one talent with which he was entrusted and returned it, a one-for-one transaction. The wickedness seems to lie in the fact that he was afraid to try and expand upon the one talent. He is condemned for what he left undone.

The master's response to the third servant is somewhat surprising. The master already enjoys a higher position in society. He is a land

owner. He is able to go on long journeys whenever he wants to. He has an able staff whom he trusts with his belongings while he is away.

When he returns from his journey, he finds that the first servant has doubled the five talents entrusted to him. And likewise, the second servant doubled the two talents entrusted to him. The master is now 7 talents ahead. And it was all done for him while he was away. His day certainly seems to be going well.

But the master's mood instantly changes to fierce anger when he meets with the third servant. Might we have expected the master to be a little more easy going about this? He hasn't lost anything. To the contrary, he already has twice as much money he had when he left. A talent, by the way, in this story is understood to have a value of 15 years wages that a laborer would earn. The master is now up by 105 years' worth. That's pretty good!

But the master doesn't say to the third servant, "ah, forget it, don't worry about it. Maybe next time, huh?" No, what the servant failed to do, namely to take the opportunity to cultivate what he was given is counted as wickedness in the master's estimation. This is something the master takes very, very seriously. There's no fooling around about this. It is wickedness to leave undone that which we ought to have done.

The other two servants in the parable, who did take what was given them and doubled its value are called *faithful*. The master says it twice to

each one: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much, enter into the joy of your master.”

Now if I were one of those first two servants, I think I would be puzzled by that last remark. I’d be thinking, “Enter into the joy of my master? Aren’t we already here in the joy of our master? Aren’t we already on his staff, living and working on his estate?”

Well, in this parable Jesus is telling us about a principle that applies both to our lives in this world and also to what sort of life we can expect in the life of the world to come. There are definite images of Judgment Day in this parable. The reading from I Thessalonians speaks of the Day of the Lord, a day of sudden disaster. And when in this parable we read how the master rewards the first two servants and says to them, “enter into the joy of your master” we’re being prompted to look beyond present circumstances.

Jesus uses economic imagery in this parable. Any business or company or any kind of project with financial implications will shut down if it doesn’t grow and prosper. But there is all the difference in the world between economic growth and the kind of growth Jesus is getting at in this parable.

The relationship between the owner of a business and the employees isn’t the same as the relationship between God and human beings. The business owner hasn’t given his employees their very lives. He doesn’t

necessary love them, at least he doesn't have to. He hasn't sent his son to die for their sins.

Each of us has received innumerable gifts from God. As Creator, God has given us life, He's given us gifts and talents, skills and abilities that He means for us to use for our growth, the growth of others and the good of the whole world. It follows from the fact that God has called upon humanity to be stewards of creation. In Genesis, God commands Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. He doesn't tell them to mark time. From the very beginning, God has an interest in both the care and stewardship of His created order, and expansion and growth.

Growth and expansion are pleasing to God because they are part of His nature and we are to reflect His nature. Remember when Jesus took a couple of loaves and a few fishes and expanded them to feed 5000 people. The application of the principle is a little different there, but it's the same idea of taking what you have and expanding it greatly.

The point of this parable is as true today as it was when Jesus told it. Those who take what they are given, whatever it is, and make it grow will be rewarded and those who don't will lose their gifts and be cast out. This is a truth and a principle which transcends time. That means it applies both in this world and in the world to come.

On the Day of the Lord we will be called to account. We will stand before God and we will see with Him to what extent we have cultivated the gifts He gave us.

Some have been given greater gifts than others. This is something the parable acknowledges. Notice that there was no difference at all in the words the master used to reward both the servant who had been given the five talents and the one who had been given two. The master's words are the same to both: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master."

The reward for having been faithful, for having multiplied upon what we are given and doing good work with it appears to be more work. The master doesn't reward the first two servants by telling them to rest on their laurels. They were faithful with a little; he now sets them over much. We can see this principle at work in our earthly lives. Promotion often follows a job well done in the workforce. The greater one exercises one's gifts, the greater the responsibility one is able to undertake.

The lesson of this parable is that the principle also applies spiritually. Those who take what the Lord has given them and have made the most of it, will be rewarded in eternity with some greater kind of work or responsibility. We're not told what this will be like, other than that it will be a joyous thing.

But those who take what the Lord has given them, and do nothing with it, failing to do what they ought to have done, will lose everything. And there will be weeping, and gnashing of teeth. Amen.