

Haiti
16 November 2008
Proper 28, Year A (RCL)

Greetings.

There is an old rabbinical story that goes like this: when a person comes to die, Moses meets him or her and asks, “did you enjoy everything that God gave you to enjoy?” That story grows out of the same tradition as the story that Jesus tells in this morning’s gospel.

Jesus’ story is about the same kind of accountability. What did the servants do with what they were given? It’s a surprising story, and it’s more surprising than we usually realize. Two of those who were given large sums to take care of return significant increases to their master – they’ve expanded and grown what they were given. But the one who plays it safe by burying the sum for which he is responsible is punished. He is thrown into hell for not having the courage to take a risk.

He isn’t just criticized for playing it safe. Perhaps more surprisingly, he’s told that he could have invested the talent with the bankers and gotten interest. That would have increased the total a little bit, even if he didn’t get the kind of return the other two did. The problem here is that in Jesus’ day, you couldn’t charge interest – it was a violation of the religious law. The owner tells his servant that he should have broken the rules in order to get some return on his investment. Nor does the owner ask how the other two made their big returns. They took a risk and got a big return – that’s what’s important.

In the oversight work of the church, we are always asking dioceses and congregations to give an account of their work. We want to know if the gifts given are producing fruit, if we’re getting a good return on investment. We’re looking for an accounting of the financial resources, but we also ask about how many members we have, how many have been baptized in the last year, how many have died, and how many marriages have been celebrated. Maybe the more interesting question is the one that Episcopal Relief and Development asks – how many lives were touched in the past year?

As I have begun to learn more about the Episcopal Church in the Caribbean and Central and South America, I’ve been amazed by how willing the church is to take the kind of bold initiatives that can produce big returns. Several dioceses are clearly working toward having a bigger impact on the lives of people around them. The diocese of Puerto Rico has three big hospitals, and they have become a major provider of health care on that island – so much so that everyone has access to medical care.

I know about some bold and creative initiatives like that here in Haiti, and I expect I will see many more in the next few days. The very origins of this nation insisted that slaves had abundant talents, and they weren’t willing to bury them in their master’s field any longer. You are living witness to this parable and its possibilities.

Where does the boldness to dig up talents come from? How do we begin to take those bold steps to risk everything? It has something to do with the recognition that we have to risk it all – that half-attempts will never be enough. In the same way that Moses’ question is about enjoying everything, we can’t enjoy a fraction of a celebration and be truly and fully alive. We have to enter in with all we have and all we are in order to find abundant life.

I'm reminded of a story about the Diocese of El Salvador. That diocese is poor and rural, with 5000 Anglicans and just 6 clergy gathered in 17 congregations, and they, too, know something about the devastation of hurricanes. It is a poor country and diocese, much like Haiti. El Salvador has had partner relationships with several U.S. dioceses, and many, many people from the States have gone there on medical missions and to help rebuild. Three years ago, after the hurricanes that devastated New Orleans, the bishop promised that the diocese would contribute all of its income in the month of September to the relief work in New Orleans. All of it, from every congregation in the diocese. Every penny. They know what it is to be the victims of natural disaster, and they shared what they had with others who had lost everything. Their knowledge of common suffering prompted a desire to share, and it has brought joy to all. It was an exceedingly bold and surprising move.

I've heard similarly bold and surprising stories over the years about the kinds of investments that are made in Haiti. The symphony orchestra we're hearing this morning is one of them. So is the school for handicapped children. So are the 250 schools and many medical clinics in very isolated communities.

All of these bold moves involve courageous and whole-hearted investment in something that leads to more abundant life. That is what Jesus asks of each and every one of us – full investment in a world that looks more like God's dream.

There is one bold and surprising move that could provide another glimmer of God's dream in this place. It's actually not that surprising, as the members of the Anglican Communion and many nations of the world have been working in that direction for several years. It has to do with forgiving the entire crushing load of international debt owed by Haiti – \$1.3 billion worth. Most of it is the result of the corruption of earlier regimes. The whole of the Episcopal Church, and our ecumenical partners, continue to work toward the elimination of this debt. Its entire value is about 1300 talents. What a gift *that* would be to manage!

The old prayer book used to begin the worship service with a re-statement of the ten commandments, or a summary of the law. "Will you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and soul, and mind, and strength? Being a full member of the Body of Christ involves full investment of all the talents we have, body, mind, heart, soul – for all of it is the gift of God. Our task is to use it for more – for more life, whole and healed and holy, for the whole world.

Contrast that way of being fully invested with what I experienced on the airplane coming down here. The couple sitting in front of me were irritated that they didn't get a drink before the plane took off. The flight attendant tried to explain to them that there wasn't time, but they continued to loudly berate him for several minutes because they didn't get what they expected. Every time he arrived to offer them something, they repeated their negative comments. Somehow I think a lot of talents stayed in (on?) the ground.

We can encounter the world as filled with God's blessing, and double what we've been given. Or we can put ourselves in hell by assuming that the world exists to serve us. The time to choose is near – the day of the Lord will meet us when we least expect it.