

We are blessed today to once again come together and celebrate the only thing that really matters: that our generous God is deeply in love with us.

Do you remember, back in January, when we started down the “Kingdom” path with Jesus in Matthew? It was the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, and we were introduced to the great Sermon on the Mount – those three chapters in Matthew’s Gospel where Jesus lays out for us what true wisdom really is. We heard part of that Great Sermon just a couple weeks ago on All Saints Day, the Beatitudes. In the chapters after the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spent a significant amount of time helping us to understand the Kingdom of Heaven.

And I think it’s fitting that as we come to the end of Matthew’s scriptural journey to the Kingdom, we also hear from Paul to the Thessalonians. Just to remind you, when some of the Apostles were dragged before the city council in Thessalonika, they were referred to as “the ones who have been turning the world upside down.” I recall the words of Franciscan Father Richard Rohr, who said of the Beatitudes: “**Jesus gives us real eyes, to realize where the real lies.**”

It takes those real eyes to look deeply into today’s helping of nourishment from the Good News to get the message, the core teaching – and again, nothing is quite what it seems – everything is somehow upside down.

Hearing today’s gospel makes me squirm, just a little – how about you? For me it doesn’t seem to be “all warm and cozy.” On the surface it doesn’t feel very consoling (I have to tell you that today’s Gospel is setting the stage for a really big Matthew finale next Sunday). So we might have to work with the gospel to find the “good” in Good News. You see, the image of God I grew up with – and at least some of you can say the same – was a sort of hybrid of Santa Claus, Ebenezer Scrooge, and the Grim Reaper – you know what I’m talking about. It was more like the FEAR OF GOD was being driven into us, rather than Fear of the Lord.

And just so we’re clear, this is not a Gospel about investment strategies – although a little healthy “fear of the Lord” on the part of some of the folks at the investment banks and loan companies might be prudent. Still, Matthew uses monetary images, things people understood, so we need, I think, to understand a few things about our ancestors in Jesus’ time. People of this time had a notion of a fixed amount of wealth. Wealth and riches were a zero-sum game; there was only so much wealth available, from which each person received what they believed was their share from God. The task of a peasant, and most people were peasants, was to satisfy the needs of the family, not to gather a storehouse of riches. This was subsistence living. And the belief was that if I take more than I need from the limited wealth, I was depriving someone else of their share. For the Jewish people, the greatest of all sins was not murder or adultery, it was greed. Greed was the greatest sin. We should also remember that a talent in this parable has nothing to do with one’s skills or abilities – a talent is a form of currency, a very large amount of money, usually only the rich had talents, precious metals in weights of 60 pounds or more, not pocket change. Each of these three servants was

gifted with what today would be millions of dollars. Matthew is using a bit of exaggeration, hyperbole, to make a point. It's good to remember the point and not get bogged down in the details.

In Proverbs, our first reading, it would appear that the writer is extolling the virtues of a particular person – a woman – a wife. But that's just on the surface. The commentaries tell us that Proverbs is an “anthology of didactic poetry.” That clarifies it, right? You'll be chatting with each other on the way home about the newfound knowledge that Proverbs is “an anthology of didactic poetry.” I'm sure you'll spend considerable time Sunday afternoon dissecting the finer points of what that means. Not really!

Proverbs is one of my favorite books of the Old Testament, a collection of sayings and exhortations, supposedly from different people (including Solomon). Sayings that are all about the importance of Wisdom – of Sophia (the Greek word for Wisdom), which is the feminine personification of God. Today we sort of confine this image of Wisdom/God to the Holy Spirit.

Proverbs begins by informing us that “The **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of knowledge.” Later, it teaches us that “the beginning of wisdom is **fear of the Lord**.” Today's morsel, the last part of the last chapter, wraps up of all the wisdom shared in the entire book which an individual could hope to gain. It's a summary – The wise person is competent, prudent, responsible, resourceful, trustworthy, industrious, loyal; and it ends by reminding us that one who is truly wise, (and faithful according to this account), that person **fears the Lord**. It's not about being afraid of God; that's an immature mindset about our relationship with God. It's the one I grew up with. What we're talking about here, **Fear of the LORD**, is one of the 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit. It's all about the respect and honor we owe to the one who created us, **because** he created us. Wisdom is not something “out there,” it does not exist in a vacuum. Wisdom only reaches full potential when it is en-fleshed in one who lives a life of love and faithfulness, loyalty. Jesus is our model for this en-fleshment, which is a definition of the word Incarnation. We pray in the Angelus: The Word became flesh; and dwelt among us.

Through Matthew and this parable, Jesus is taking the who literary convention of “parable” and turning it upside down. In a conventional parable with three key players, that is the three servants, the first two would typically be the “foils” of the story and get a dressing down, and the third would be the one who acted prudently and be rewarded. And according to the social convention of that time, the third servant in the story IS the one who acted prudently, acted to safeguard, to protect his master's resources with which he was gifted. The first two servants, given 5 and 2 talents respectively, took risks with the master's resources with which they were gifted, and doubled the resources. The first two risked – the third did not.

Jesus and Matthew want us to take a deep dive into this parable. There are other rules here, not social but spiritual, which can bring us to a more profound meaning, even push us to see this parable differently. Risk can only happen when there is trust, and

trust has to be a two-way transaction. The master trusted the servants, but only 2 of the 3 trusted the master, and dared to risk. Only 2 of the 3 acted with Fear of the Lord, and felt free to exercise their initiative. The third feared, was afraid, and so didn't risk, didn't exercise initiative, and hid the gifts.

These spiritual rules offer that, when you and I are graced with gifts of the Spirit (remember, God **trusts** us), we are encouraged to work with Spirit by giving it away. This goes against every "human" inclination – it conflicts with our very human makeup, which says that if we let go of something, it's gone, we've lost it. But according to the Spiritual rules, what we get freely we freely give away. When we do, we are immediately aware of the presence of more Spirit, of more gift – the gift of great value. **Have you had this experience?** -- -- When we give Spirit away, we get it back two-fold. The risk pays double! Not a bad investment.

On the other side, if we're paralyzed by fear and try to own, to hide, to protect the gift of Spirit, it decreases.

Refusing to risk is refusing to trust.

Refusing to risk is seeking a guarantee that we will never fail.

God would rather have us receive the great gift and take a risk with it, even if we would lose, rather than try to own or protect it.

We are the servants in the parable. The gift is offered to each one of us. We have been given something very precious by one who has an abundance of riches. What is the great treasure which we're all given? The talent we've received is the ability, the capacity to know and love God, the gift of faith. It's an unlimited, infinite gift. It's the teaching of Jesus, the model of his life and ministry, the love of the Father he showed us in his coming down as one of us; it's the love he showed us **on the cross**. This gift, this love, is so valuable, no exaggeration, no amount, could describe it. Jesus is the treasure given for our salvation.

We all have a different capacity to receive this precious gift. And every one of us has the capability to expand and stretch ourselves in order that our love reaches full capacity. So here's something we can hold onto this week, and even as we're listening to the Gospel from Matthew again next week, as we think about the gift of great value we've received:

***Can you and I hope to stand before the Lord on the Last Day and tell him we haven't done anything because we were afraid we might fail?***

Yeah, when I hear this Gospel, it makes me squirm more than just a little. How about you?