

## Weekly Reading – Monday, November 10, 2008

We're down to the final two Sundays in the current church/ liturgical year, and to the final two parables in the Matthew 25 compendium. Here are my comments on the lesson for November 16, 2008, the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time and Proper 28.

Zephaniah 1: 7, 12 - 18

Prophet Zephaniah announces the coming day of the Lord, a day of judgment, when "neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them" (vs. 18). The issue is complacency and cynicism. So vs. 12: "At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.' Their wealth shall be plundered and their houses laid waste." The belief or presumption that Zephaniah assaults is that God is not a factor, will not act, can be safely overlooked, and that we do not live in a moral universe where our choices matter. Such complacency and cynicism is an ever present factor and temptation for we live in the midst of the gray shades and disorder of daily life and history where moral meaning can be difficult to discern. And yet God is God and God cannot be mocked. We've had a recent lesson in this haven't we? The conventional political tactics have been founded on cynicism and the belief that the American people can be manipulated and frightened. Any election is a complex thing, but the cynics have been proven wrong. Americans can defy the prophets of cynicism and politicians of polarization.

I Thessalonians 5: 1 -11

The "day of the Lord" is once more the theme. "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night." Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are not "in darkness," as others may be, "So then let us not fall asleep as others do, let us keep awake and sober . . . and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." I especially love the final verse, "Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." Again, as in Zephaniah (above) the issue is cynicism, the lapse into the notion that nothing much matters, that we do not live a moral universe and that our own choices and actions have no consequence. Paul calls this living "in darkness," and "sleep." At any given time in history or in life, it is easy to lapse into such nihilism, but perhaps especially so in a world as complex as our own. How can we make a difference? How can anything change? What does it matter what I do? But, again, leading to this election, on election day and the days to follow, did we not "encourage one another and build one another up?" That sentiment reminds me of Browne Barr's book on the church, "High Flying Geese," in which Browne likened the church to a flock of geese who exhibit a variety of interesting characteristics. It turns out geese "honk" in a pre-flight ritual to encourage one another for the long flight ahead. Honk on, brothers and sisters!

Matthew 25: 14 - 30

And yes, just as Zephaniah and Paul have had the Day of the Lord in view, so this entire 25th chapter has the end, eschatology, a reckoning, as its horizon. Matthew's message to us is, you

don't have forever. What time is it? Time to wake up, time to be bold and resolute. As we turn then to the Parable of the Talents, the eschatological stage is set: "For it is as if a man going away on a journey summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them." Then, in verse 19, "After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them." The cynics say there will be no return, no settling of accounts, that our choices do not matter. There is no God, no moral meaning. The perplexing thing is why the poor, pitiful one talent guy takes the brunt, why the fellow with the least is under the gun. Well, first of all, remember that he ain't so poor nor pitiful as we may think. Even one talent was quite a sum. Around \$100,000 I believe, but check the commentaries to be sure.

The reason the one talent man becomes the dramatic focus may be that we all, or at least many of us, tend to see ourselves in him. The one who has the shortest straw, the least to work with, the deck stacked against him. Aren't there always other people who have so much more? More money, more power, and more opportunity than we do? With this line of reasoning, we excuse and exonerate ourselves. We tend to identify with this servant and not the others who have been given much more. So Matthew reminds us that even those who have received a smaller trust have been entrusted with a great deal and that we can't excuse ourselves by making self-serving comparison to others. God will be faithful, which means that God will come to call us to account. One might ask of this text, "Where's the grace?" God has blessed us with the grace of the gospel, the gospel of mercy and the gospel of Jesus Christ. This grace may be free but its not cheap. God expects something.