

ON HUMAN INVESTMENT

"When one finds a worthy wife, her value is far beyond pearls." Thus opens today's first reading, from Proverbs.

Of course her value is far beyond pearls; she is a human being!

All human beings have the right to have their person – their uniqueness, their value, their self – recognized and respected. This principle of human dignity is "the foundation of a moral vision for society."



What exactly does "recognized and respected" mean? Read on.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the familiar parable of the talents: "A man gave one servant five talents, who used them to make another five talents. He gave another servant two talents, who made another two. He gave a third servant one talent, who dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

The first two servants were invited to "Come, share your master's joy." The third servant was thrown into the "darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth."

The first two servants feasted at the banquet table in the Kingdom of Heaven. It did not matter that one had received a higher capital gain than the other had; both were invited.

The third servant may not be in Hell, but he's certainly not sitting at Heaven's banquet table.

Although the reference to "talents" was to a unit of currency common in the Roman Empire, it is an appropriate allegory for our abilities and intentions.

We are born with certain talents and later given our spiritual gifts from the Holy Spirit. How will we invest our talents and gifts? Will we be like the third servant? The third servant was risk averse. Even worse, he was less than prudent, choosing not to put the money in the bank. His choice to do nothing paid off poorly.

Where exactly are we investing our talents? We know from Jesus's life that he was not praising the servants for doubling their money but for using what they were given. Jesus's priority was people. Like Jesus, our priority must be people.

So back to the question of what exactly "recognized and respected" mean.

A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst; do we recognize the poor and vulnerable and put their needs first?

We show respect by treating people as not merely objects of our kindness. People have a right to a sense of self-esteem and to develop their own capabilities.

We show ultimate respect for people by working to enable them to develop and contribute their unique gifts, because to do justice to another person is not to do for him or her. It is to invest in someone.

How can you invest your time, talent and treasure in human beings? At the very least, you can put "money in the bank [charities]."

Many of us are likely concerned about our schedules and relaxation today and our financial security for tomorrow. We will work for justice, help the poor, and invest in people after we're in a good place. For those of us who recognize themselves in this, St. Paul offers cautionary advice for waiting for the right time, "For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night."

(Readings for the Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time)