

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**November 15, 2020 - Streaming Mass**  
**33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Year A      Mt. 25:13-40**

After his time as president, Ronald Reagan wrote his autobiography. One of the book's reviewers remarked that the section on his childhood seemed most interesting, because it revealed a side of his personality so different from the confident, relaxed, self-assured Reagan people had become used to over the years. I thought I might retell one antidote because it deals with an aspect of today's Gospel.

Reagan grew up in what today we would call a "dysfunctional family." His father was an alcoholic who would periodically disappear from home as he went off on a bender. Reagan recounts how as a boy growing up he suffered from feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. He wasn't very good at sports; usually the last kid picked when choosing up sides in a game. He tells how one day he was playing second base, when the ball was hit right to him, with everyone waiting for him to catch the ball, only to see it drop behind him. For a boy of eleven or twelve in the community in which he grew up, sports was a very important measure of one's worth, and he never felt he was as good as the other kids he played with. One day his mother convinced him to overcome his shyness and take part in what was, before talking movies and television, the local form of entertainment. People would stand up before a group assembled in the town church or school hall and recite from memory some famous speech, or poem, or piece of literature. In any case young "Dutch" Reagan got up before the crowd, recited his little humorous speech, and then received what he had never gotten before: applause and cheers. He notes in the book how he did not realize it at the time, but his life was changed forever by that one experience. Sixty years later that shy teenager would become known as "The Great Communicator."

I tell that story not because I am some devout Reaganaut, but because it relates how one individual confronted and overcame his feelings of inferiority. It dovetails with today's Gospel that is addressed to anyone who has ever felt, at some time in his or her life, that they too did not amount to very much. It speaks to anyone who is in danger of allowing dark feelings of inadequacy and insecurity to blind them to strengths and abilities they do in fact possess. Today's Gospel challenges each of us to ask what is the basic attitude with which we deal with life. Is it one of fear and retreat from life's dangers, an attempt to shield ourselves from what threatens on every side to do us in? Or will it be a sense of adventure, of risk-taking, a willingness to rise to meet the challenge, so that life can be faced in all its ambiguity, but with all its possibility as well? It is part of the message of Jesus that with a deep faith in God, so

many of the demons that threaten to overwhelm us are robbed of their terror, that life can be lived as a gift of the Creator and not just some test for a vengeful Deity.

Today's Gospel, often called the "parable of the talents," would have us reflect on what kind of person God would have us be. Very clearly there is recognition that, in God's sight, self-obliteration is just as bad as self-exaltation. We are called to make a return on what we have received, to invest ourselves in the fray of life, to build upon what we have been given; and no excuses will be accepted. Of course, what can distract us from the task is the invidious logic of comparison. We see what others have and we have not; and then we are blinded to the gifts we do possess. We forget that the law of compensation that rules in nature also seems to govern humans as well. The peacock is one of the most beautiful of birds, but it has an ugly, screeching cry, while the nightingale emits the sweet sound of its voice from a body that looks like a little turd. The media tells us that we are supposed to have it all, that we can have it all. And, we may feel sorry, angry, or guilty if we don't. Instead we are told in the Gospel that we simply have to be who we really are, and that will be more than enough.

The central character in the parable is, of course, the man who is afraid to invest the sum of money he has received. For him the market is always too bearish, the risks too high. He prefers to wait things out; but he waits too long and accomplishes nothing. We might ask ourselves, "Are there aspects of me in this individual who finds himself in situations that are always too ambiguous, too complicated, too threatening? Are there aspects of me in this man who, paralyzed in fear with misgivings about his master (or we, about our God), decides to bury his treasure, decides to bury a part of his very self, in the quiet corners of his life, so as to spare himself the pain, the anxiety of grappling with the hard choices of life? Mark Twain once said that in twenty years it may be the things we have not done, more than the things that we have done, that we will come to regret. Today's Gospel challenges us to consider what we have done with what we have been dealt—and not just in terms of our gifts, but also in terms of our pain, our hurts, our disappointments; we are the sum of all our parts. What are we doing, with the treasure that we are, with the opportunities we possess?

In some sense the man who refuses to invest has chosen to play the role of "victim;" to luxuriate in the sweet solace of self-pity; to announce that he has gotten the lousy deal (others got ten or five shares, but he got only one); to allow himself to be paralyzed by the misfortune in his life so that he wears his scars as a badge, so that he considers himself exempt from having to get out there, and doing whatever has to be done. It is the same set tale of poor, poor me! This is not to deny the sadness, even the tragedy, in someone's life—be it the end of a relationship, financial disaster,

the onset of some illness, or the effects of prejudice in a racist, sexist, misogynist, agist, homophobic society. It is to say, though, how fruitless, how nonproductive, how self-destructive is this posture of supposed powerlessness, that I can do nothing to make things different; that I am forever stuck in the misery of the past. True, the past cannot be changed, but it can be recognized for what it is. It can be learned from; it can be transcended; it can be overcome. It can be absorbed and mitigated by new experiences. One can grow beyond it, i.e., if one does not stay locked up in the cellar of one's misery, but ventures forth to engage life honestly, responsibly, courageously. There is a time for anger, a time for tears, even the time for accusation (justice must be served). But we can't spend our lives poised forever between reverie and regret, lest we miss the opportunities in the moment at hand. Life is a growth stock, if we can believe the words of Jesus.

For the Christian who sincerely wants to do God's will, this test of living may still be difficult. And there is a line of the parable explains why. It says very simply that after the master distributed the various sums of money, "he went away." The servants are left on their own. We are on our own as well, but not entirely. We are left with a vote of confidence in our ability on God's part. God trusts us more than we may trust ourselves, more than certain others may trust us. God trusts in our wits, our intelligence, our goodness to make our way through life. In a few moments when we recite the Creed we, will say that we believe in God and that we do by an act of faith. But for some it may require a much deeper back to really believe that God believes in each of us.