

**A Sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany
Winchester, Massachusetts
Preached on the Twenty-Second Sunday
after Pentecost
November 13, 2011
by the Reverend Thomas James Brown**

Matthew 25:14-30

When I came to serve as your rector there were a couple of things that your lay leaders knew were pre-existing conditions, commitments of mine which would impact – hopefully positively - on our ministry together. Some of those are about to service to the church beyond Winchester, whereas others are more centrally about care for myself and my own life of prayer. Last Sunday was a day for the latter.

After every All Saints Sunday with its great traditions, I keep yet one more, which is to travel west to join eight other priest colleagues for 2.5 days of rigorous conversation and accountability, deep prayer, good food and strenuous exercise. My final destination is always St. Dorothy's Rest, a rustic and charming Episcopal camp, circa 1922, in the northwest corner of Sonoma County. The neighbors on that mountainous hillside amidst gorgeous redwoods, must be on of two things: they're either delighted to have so many peace-loving Episcopalians coming and going week in and week out, or they're too happy to really give it a second thought because of their rich harvest of marijuana. Either way, they're congenial, and the local restaurants and shop owners have actually gotten to know us, if not by name, at least by the uptick in their revenues.

Two of us live in California, three in the New York area, and three in the Midwest. You won't be surprised to know that I talk about you, nor that I know more than I should about the places where each of them serves.

When we finally got to St. Dorothy's Rest, long after you were asleep last Sunday night, one of my colleagues said, "Thomas! How is it among all those ambitious Bostonians?" I was a bit taken aback, and lest you get defensive yourself, consider the fact that he serves a working class parish in a struggling town in southern New Jersey.

Whether it's good or bad, living in Boston means that we're surrounded by many bright, energetic high-achievers, and we place high expectations on ourselves, and on others.

Great cities attract ambitious people. You know this. You can sense it when you walk around - cities send messages. New York tells you, above all, that you should make more money. There are other messages too. You should be hipper,

and always wear black. And better looking. But the clearest message is that you should be richer.

The message we give and the message we send is that you should be smarter. We really ought to read all those books on our shelves, and on everybody else's shelves too. We value ambition, being industrious, and frugal.

You'll hear churches talk about frugality and efficiency, but ambition - not so much. Christianity has by and large disapproved of ambition. Think of the long list of Christ's teachings: *Those who save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them. The last will be first and the first will be last. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*

In his parable of the talents, Jesus gives us a picture of the importance of healthy ambition and the dangers of being passive. He tells the story of a wealthy master who entrusts all of his property to his servants, giving them what are huge amounts of wealth - one receives five talents, one two, another one. Later he returns and holds them accountable for what they have done with the money. The two who went to work using their creativity and taking risks, doubles their money. The owner sings their praises and rewards them extravagantly.

But the story comes to focus on the unfortunate third man. He had been completely responsible. Honest, and scrupulous, but out of fear of taking a risk and fear of failure he hid his talent in the ground, and so only the one talent to return to his master.

The master is enraged. "You wicked and slothful servant!" he says. And then he takes away the one man's talents and gives it to the one who now has ten.

I am sure that many people have long treasured in their hearts the secret confidence that Jesus was really an entrepreneurial capitalist. Maybe you've seen the book out about Jesus as the model CEO. You know, he had a good mission statement, he had only three years to train twelve people, he had some staffing problems and lost 10% of his work force, and so on . . . Well, here's your proof!

Do you know what a talent was worth back then? We are so accustomed to hearing this as a story about using our talents and personal abilities well that we miss something crucial. A talent was the highest unit of measurement that existed in the ancient world. Owning a talent would seem more like owning "a trillion" these days. Far from being a mean-spirited boss, the master showers the servants with riches beyond anything they could imagine.

Think about the last time you had a close scrape with serious illness or death - for yourself or someone you love. Can you feel this morning what you felt, at least for those moments then? Remember how fragile, how precious, every moment

seemed? You probably felt deep gratitude for life itself, and for the ordinary moments with those you love.

This parable is a story about you and me. Because we too, Jesus says, are servants of an unimaginably generous Master who gives us endless riches.

Even when the economy is broken, we live our days under cascades of riches. So much is completely unearned, extravagant gifts showered upon us: parents who, imperfect as all parents are, sacrificed more than we know to get us launched; mentors and teachers who came into our life to show us what our lives could be; friends who stick with us; but even more basic, the air we breathe, the food on the table, the glory of autumn leaves fluttering to the ground.

These treasures, the parable says, have to be invested, not hoarded, or hidden away. My colleague's question last Sunday night was a bit disarming, I admit it. But, I wonder if we're ambitious enough?

Christians have a word for this kind of big ambition, it is called stewardship. It's partly, though not solely, about money. It's about coming to understand and to love that we're the caretakers, not the owners. To be really ambitious is to live life with an open heart and spirit. It means caring for the well-being of those outside our circle - our neighbors who struggle in Chelsea, and yes, our friends who struggle right here in this parish.

Here at Epiphany, located just north of one of our nation's most ambitious cities, we're called to offer what no other institution can - a place filled with ambition for God - a place of faith and hope, a place that offers from its pulpit, its loft, its website, and its entire core - an invitation to live life joyously and sacrificially.

Let me be specific. If you are part of Epiphany's life, or a friend of ours, we need your big generous ambitious support. If we haven't heard from you, please let us know that what's happening here matters to you.

This parable of the talents says that the question we will be asked in the end won't be about how life is in Boston, or any other place. No the question will be: Did we offer what we had, and did we give for God's sake and for the sake of others?

The question will be: were we ambitious enough?