

Matthew 25:14-30
"To Not Fall Asleep on Thanksgiving"

November 19, 2017
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I want to take for my sermon this morning two one-liners and a question. The first one-liner comes from Saint Irenaeus who once upon a time is supposed to have said, "The glory of God is man fully alive." It's hard to imagine who Irenaeus might have been looking at, and what they might have been doing, when he said this: "The glory of God is man fully alive." Irenaeus lived in the mid to late 2nd century in ancient Rome. History tells us that unless you were a government official or of royalty, ancient Rome was no picnic. Daily bread and clean water were hard to find. War and oppression were not. And if you claimed to be a Christian, if you were known to belong to the Jesus community, life could be dangerous. Most of Rome's emperors, including Emperor Septimius Severus, who ruled during the time of Irenaeus, thought of themselves less as emperor and more as God, not taking kindly to anyone who would pledge allegiance to another God, who would stand up in a public place and declare that the real God wants to see the poor cared for, not exploited. Such audacity was considered a direct affront to the emperor, punishable by a thousand deaths. One such story is that of Perpetua, who died in 203, just one year after Irenaeus. A Christian and a new mother, Perpetua was taking classes to prepare for her baptism, when she was arrested by Emperor Severus and thrown in jail for failure to show patriotism. Records indicate that when told she could spare her life by simply denying that she was a Christian, she reportedly pointed to a pitcher and said, "Do you see this pitcher here? Could it be called by any other name than what it is? Well, neither can I be called anything other than what I am, a Christian." At that she was placed in the middle of a crowded arena and fed to a pack of wild bulls. When her death did not come quick enough

to please the crowds, a Roman gladiator drew his sword as Perpetua herself guided his hand to her throat.

Like I said, it's hard to imagine what Irenaus might been looking at, or who he might have been thinking about, when he said, "The glory of God is man fully alive." If he was thinking about the likes of Perpetua, then surely he didn't just mean the glory of God is *man* fully alive, but the glory of God is any women, child, or creature who is fully alive. Which brings me to the second one-liner I want to give us this morning. This one from Jesus, and the parable I read for us just a moment ago: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

It doesn't sound like Jesus, does it? I mean, even if you don't really know what Jesus sounds like, it doesn't sound like what we imagine Jesus sounding like. To those who already have a lot, they will be given a whole lot more, but from those who are already scraping by on nothing, they're about to become desperate. Whatever happened to, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they will be filled?" And, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

"From the one who has much it will be taken and given to the one who has little." That's what we might expect to hear. But it's not what we get. Instead, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." It's a story not about how much we have but about what we do with how much we have. I don't know how you work it, but as Jesus tells it, there's a man who is given \$5 from his great-uncle for his birthday. He takes it to

the track and puts it all on his choice mare to come in first in the third at Suffolk Downs and he doubles his money. He hopes it will show his great-uncle, who has built up a nice little fortune for himself, that he might be a good executor for his will someday. Another man gets \$2 from the same great-uncle and he gives it to his broker to buy him two shares of Apple, and when the market goes up he does as well as the \$5-dollar man. A third man receives only \$1 and he decides, for good reason, to play it safe because he knows his great-uncle to be a hard man, shrewd and calculating. So when the \$1 dollar man get his \$1, instead of playing the slots with it, he stuffs it in a tin can and shoves it under his mattress. Then, as hearers of the parable, we wait for the punch line that we know is coming. "Play it safe like the \$1 dollar man. Don't take chances on what you don't know. God is a hard God. Treasure what you're given and neither ask nor try for more." Only that's not at all what the great-uncle says. He says, in the end it's the people who go all-or-nothing, who don't hold back that are held up as the shining examples of what it means to have faith, or courage, or whatever it takes to be fully alive. And the person who plays it better-safe-than-sorry goes off into the darkness never to be heard from again.

It's preposterous really. "To the one who has, more will be given; and to the one who has little, even what they have will be taken away." In other words, those who go through life living only half-of-it, wind up being only half-alive. And we tell ourselves, that's not going to be me. What Jesus doesn't tell us, however, but which he knows we'll figure out sooner or later, is that sometimes, when all you have is \$5 of pain and heartache and you try to cash it in for something better, all you get is \$5 more of pain and heartaches. And sometimes, when all you have are just a few nickels of joy to rub together, you lose even that.

I've sat at the bedside of dozens of dying people listening to them recount their lives. I heard a 103-year old woman tell me once, through tears of bitterness and regret, "I feel cheated." And I heard a 20-year old boy with brain cancer say, "It was full and it was good." And I suppose, depending upon how you lived, both were right.

This past Thursday morning I stopped in at Mount Saint Rita's Healthcare Center to visit with Herb Quilitzsch, Some of you know Herb. He's been a member here at the church for longer than I've been alive, though he hasn't been able to attend services for many years. Herb is in his nineties now and spends most of his days either napping in his bed or napping in an easy chair that sits beside his bed. This past Thursday it was his easy chair. I knocked on his door and called his name. He lifted his head to look at me, though I could tell he couldn't quite remember who I was. I told him my name and that I was from the church and I asked him if I could sit down beside him and he offered me a Hershey Kiss from a little paper bowl that he had sitting on his lunch tray and I gave him a blanket that our children made in Sunday School last week as part of their lesson. I told him that our children wanted him to have it. At no point during our visit did Herb really say anything to me. Every now and then we would look at a picture of him and his late wife that he had on his nightstand, but mostly he just sat there with his new blanket—blue on one side and yellow on the other—sitting across his lap. After about 45 minutes I said I had to get going but that I was really grateful for our time together, and grateful to him for sharing his home with me. Herb looked at me, nodded thoughtfully, smiled a little, and took a corner of his blanket and just lifted it in my direction to rest it on my leg. Do you see what he did?

In his book, *"Truth to Tell,"* Frederick Buechner writes:

God is the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of finding one lost sheep than out of ninety-nine other sheep who had the good sense not to get lost in the

first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd all turn out to have other things more important to do than come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home a freak show. The man with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner. The old woman in the moth-eaten fur coat who makes her daily rounds of the garbage cans. God is the old wino with his pint in a brown paper bag. The pusher, the whore, the village idiot who stands at the blinker light waving his hand as the cars go by. [*The old man with is two-dollar blanket.*]¹ They are seated at the silk laid table in the great hall. The candles are all lit and the champagne glasses filled. At a sign from the host, the musicians in their gallery strike up, "*Amazing Grace.*"²

There is no explanation for it. Don't even try to explain it. Some people will sit down at the table this Thursday, eat their fill of turkey and then promptly fall asleep in the recliner. But those with ears to hear and eyes to see will more promptly get up from the table and, being fully alive to all they have received, will go forth to give and share and give and share, and they will receive even more.

I said there was going to be a question in this sermon. Here it is: are you alive out there today?

¹ Italics is my addition, though I'm generally indebted in this sermon to Buechner and his take on the Parable of the Talents, which added much to my own understanding.

² Pg. 66.