

Response - ability!  
Pentecost 27 A

The day of the Lord is not this happy event Christians should look forward to with expectation. The day of the Lord is akin to the day the police come knocking at your door and tell you they have a warrant for your arrest. That happened to a friend of ours in Maryland. Paul is now a seminary student and is African American. Paul was a business owner at the time of his arrest, active in his community and Christ Episcopal Church, and well known for hiring at risk young adults, training them to install fiber optic cable and turning their lives around. I met one of those young men and I was impressed.

In front of his wife Danielle, their two children, Jordan and Candace, Paul was arrested, handcuffed and led away to jail. It was case of mistaken identity. A big mistake! Paul told me it was the worst day in his life. The two days and one night he spent in jail opened his eyes to the criminal justice system and also made him aware of how stupid things can lead many young African-American men to jail and a police record. For Paul it was a day of wrath. He was enraged.

In our scripture lessons the Day of the Lord speaks of a time when God's kingdom comes. The prophet Zephaniah does not mince words:

"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."

"Rest complacently on their dregs" sounds very familiar. Dregs are the leftover particles when you make coffee and some of the grounds leak into your pot. Dregs are what are least attractive, valuable or the most unpleasant part of something, especially a group of people. The Thesaurus calls dregs "waste, scum, losers." Webster's defines dregs as "the most undesirable parts" The people who have made no attempt to change their undesirable behavior are being told their day of judgment is coming. Accountability is coming. Do recent headlines make this passage familiar? Could the Day of the Lord be a form of needed regulation that speaks to many institutions, including Wall Street?

The Day of the Lord is sudden and swift like a thief in the night. The letter to the Thessalonians indicates that early Christians expected this swift justice. The apostle Paul was simply reminding the church of this fact. When "they" say, "Peace and Security," Paul compares their sudden destruction to a woman in labor. Once it starts, the process is difficult to stop and there is no escape. One could speculate a lot here as to the meaning. The point he makes strongly is that the children of light, a metaphor for those who are born of God, will be ready, sober, and welcoming of His salvation. They do NOT behave like those who rest complacently.

"The Lord will not do good, nor will He do harm." Consider that way of thinking and how it might apply to today's attitudes and behavior. It sounds like the

thought, “If there are no immediate consequences to my behavior, then I can do what I want.” Children of God are to be smarter than that; they are savvy about evil and greed.

Michelangelo, the great sculptor once said, “The great danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high, and we miss it, but that it is too low, and we reach it.” That is the moral of the Parable of the Talents. The parable has nothing to do with financial investments or accumulation of wealth or being down on your luck but has everything to do with responsibility for aiming high. How high you ask? As high as the Sistine chapel or higher!

The master of the gospel story entrusts his slaves with his property, hoping to both gain and share some benefit from their labors. He gives each slave according to his ability – a point of fact that should not be forgotten. Remember that response and ability always go together!

Yet one slave refuses to use the talent, a coin of great weight and value. This slave gives two reasons for his failure. One is the character of the master and the other is his fear of failure. In his assessment the slave says his boss has a reputation for being “a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” His assessment does not take into account that the master simply wanted a productive return for the money he gave them.

Hiding his talent, fearing failure might have been justified given the picture he paints of the owner. On the other hand, knowing there would be an accounting might make him think of working harder. Instead the slave rests on his “dregs”, the excuses of his fears and unjust characterization of a fair boss. The one talent he was given could be multiplied. Did he figure the master did not care since he was a wealthy guy and would not lose very much if he just sat on what he received? Was he lazy? Was he handicapped in some way? We are told he was paralyzed by his own fear and prejudice. He was even afraid to give it to the bankers. I don’t blame him! Unfortunately, this servant was irresponsible and unjust, given the master’s treatment of the other two slaves! He aimed low, when he could have aimed higher. Remember, each was given according to his ability and no bailout was attached.

And then we read this striking thought at the end of the story: “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.” I know how this sounds. This has nothing to do with spreading the wealth around or not. This has to do with using what one is given. It has to do with the fact that all of us have been given something. Some choose to throw it away. Others receive more talent because they are open to their “response – ability” and discipline required to handle more. Does everyone have the ability to respond to God? Come to the Talk Back class and I’ll tell you what I believe and why.

These are tough stories for tough times. What makes it harder is that there are those who believe they have nothing. This reminds us we have been given much by God and we are called upon to give an accounting for His hard work. His mercy comes at a price. His grace is not cheap but costly through the cross of Christ. Though God’s

nature is always to have mercy, His mercy comes with the ability we are born with to respond to it. Because God believes in us He will always present us with the ability to believe in Him and respond to His Love.

God desires us with our talents above ground. His desire for us is to present Him a just return for His investment. There is a paradox in the parable of the Talents. It says God will punish those who do not serve Him rightly. It says this because He is just, not unjust. Because He is merciful – He wants everyone to respond to His generosity of Spirit. In our hands is the ability to bring blessing to others. It is on our hands to bring blessing to the One who gave us His Son, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, He gave us everything. To all who ask, He gives the Holy Spirit abundantly. God, increase our faith that our talents may grow.

Amen.