

### **33th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Year A; Mt 25:14-30**

#### **My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

Sin isn't always something bad that we have done. Sometimes it is something good that we should have done but did not.

Marguerite Wilkinson has graphically expressed this thought in a little poem that she entitle "Guilty". It goes like this:

"I never cut my neighbor's throat,  
My neighbor's purse I never stole,  
I never spoiled his house or land,  
But God have mercy on my soul,  
For I am haunted night and day  
By all the deeds I have not done,  
The costly valor never won."

In today's gospel reading Jesus told a story that dramatizes this same theme. It is about a rich man who was going on a long journey. Before leaving he called his servants together and divided his wealth among them. To one he entrusted five thousand pieces of silver. To another he gave two thousand, and to another one thousand.

Then he went away and stayed gone a long time. But eventually he returned and called his servants together for an accounting of what they had done with his money. The first two brought good reports. They had put the money to work, and each had doubled the amount with which he had been entrusted.

But the focus of the story falls on the third man, and his report was not so good. Actually, it was an admission of failure and an attempt to excuse it. Here is what he said: "My lord, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back."

Then comes the master's response to that report. Listen once more to what he said: "You wicked, lazy servant. So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on y return? Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

Jesus seems to be endorsing an economic system under which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. But to understand the story we must keep in mind that Jesus wasn't talking about noblemen and servants and silver. I suspect he could have cared less whether one servant failed to make his wealthy master a little bit wealthier. But he cared a great deal what people did with their lives, and that's what he was talking about - God, and life, and you and me.

Plain and simple, he was saying that one of the worst things you and I can do with our lives is to underline them. That's what the man on the story did. He wasn't a liar, or any of the things we ordinarily associate with serious moral failure. All he did was play it safe, bury his talent in the ground and refuse to invest it.

That means that a person doesn't have to be a gangster to displease God. Just take the great gift of life and sit on it. Don't try to improve it, increase it, or enrich it. Don't try to become anything more than you are right now. Stay with the subjects you already know. Cling to the old, familiar and comfortable ideas. Don't ever question them; don't ever rethink them; and above all, don't ever expose yourself to any new ideas. Just sit on life and try to keep everything, including yourself, just like it is.

The man in the story started with a thousand silver pieces and ended with a thousand. He didn't lose anything, but he didn't gain anything. He didn't do anything wrong, but he didn't do anything right. In the strictest sense of the word, he did not fail. He just did not try, and for that he received one of the sternest reprimands to be found in the New Testament.

In the eyes of Jesus, life is a gift which we hold in trust for God. And the greatest thing about that gift is its potential. The growth possibilities are almost unlimited. Our job is to take it and use it, to see what we can do with it and make of it. And one of the worst sins that any of us can commit is to treat life like a buried treasure, to hang on to it, to keep it all for ourselves, and then give it back to God, unused, no bigger or better than it was when he gave it to us.

What do you suppose went wrong with the man in our story? Why did he lie down on life? Why did he bury his gift in the ground and refuse to invest it?

Well, if we take his report at face value, there were really two reasons. One was a distorted view of life. He thought the whole thing was a rip-off. He said to his master, "I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter."

If I understand his language, he was calling his master an unfeeling, dishonest tyrant. In other words, he was cynical about the entire operation; and that's how some people feel about life. They think the whole thing is rigged against them; and therefore, they refuse to participate.

Well, if I felt that way, I probably would not try either. Cynicism is more than philosophy. It is a debilitating disease that works its way into the muscle tissue of the soul and paralyzes every effort of living. A person may say, "Why should I vote? One vote doesn't make any difference. And besides that, it doesn't matter who is elected. All politicians are dishonest, anyway."

When you hear someone talking like that, you can know that he or she has the same problem as the man in our story. They have become cynical about life. And it doesn't stop with politics; it invades everything. Religion – “Why should I go to church? The whole thing is filled with hypocrites from top to bottom.” Home life – “Why should I get married? All marriage does is ruin good friendships. I don't know one married couple that is really happy.”

That is cynicism, and it can poison every area of life. It was one of the problems of the man in our story. His other problem was fear of failure. Listen to him, “out of fear I went off buried your talent in the ground.” That is what he said, and his reasoning was that it is better to not try than it is to try and fail.

He could not have been more wrong. You see, it isn't a sin to fail, not if you try. The only real failure is the failure to try. Have you ever stopped to consider how many times Jesus failed? If you think of his life as an unblemished record of all wins and no losses, you are dead wrong. He failed with Judas Iscariot. Right up to the last, he did his best to turn that man back from the brink of self-destruction; but he failed. He failed to call his notion back to God. All through his ministry, he preached to them and pleads with them; but at the last they cried for his blood. He failed.

### **My Dear Brothers and Sisters,**

We should be encouraged by that to try. If Jesus failed, it certainly isn't a sin. The only real failure is the failure to try. Don't bury your life in the ground. This world is hurting for love, hurting for justice, hurting for righteousness. If you have a capacity for any of those things, dig it up, dust it off, and put it to work. Don't worry about results. Just use what God has given you, and one day you will hear him say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant. Come; share your master's joy.” **Amen.**