

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

“All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.” In your experience with the Episcopal Church, in particular, you may have heard this phrase used frequently. It is, or was, commonly used when the Sunday morning offering was received. It also is a ‘table grace’ recommended by the Book of Common Prayer, giving thanks for meals and the opportunity to share them with family and friends. It is actually a quote from the Old Testament, from First Chronicles, Chapter 29, Verse 14, and to put it into its Biblical context, and to update its translation a bit, we could hear its message this way: “But who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand.” The verse is part of a prayer offered by King David as the task to build the great Jerusalem Temple is being assigned to his son Solomon. According to the Book of Chronicles, thousands of the king’s loyal subjects are gathered for this ceremony and to hear his public prayer. They have brought animal sacrifices and they say they are ready and willing to give gold, silver, and their labor toward the accomplishment of this, the greatest construction project they will ever know.

All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee. I think this is the primary message Jesus wants us to come away with as we hear this parable of the man who entrusts his portfolio to those three slaves before he goes away. Referring to them as slaves, rather than business managers BTW, underscores the very point that they truly have nothing of their own, and can manage only those things which are given to them by a trusting master. But it’s not just the money, as Jesus might expect us to realize, but all that creation has to offer, all the blessings God provides. Like the slaves in the parable, we have been given the extraordinary opportunity to be temporary stewards of all those blessings, having the authority to use them where and how we might think wisest and best. We have the freedom to make decisions about their application. Or not to. We could just ignore the intentions for which we have received them, go about enjoying them without taking any responsibility for their potency, try to hoard them for ourselves, and, essentially, waste them. The master in the parable seems to have a passion about how his blessings are used, and is quick to express his opinion when the accounts are being settled.

Anyway, when considered allegorically as a reflection on the relationship of God and human beings, that seems to be the primary takeaway from this teaching of Jesus. But, the parable has some other complexities, and Jesus offers some additional insights to help us understand. Our translation has him beginning the story with “It is as if...”. The “it” here is the Kingdom of Heaven, which Jesus tries to explain in various ways with various parables. Taking all of his hints together, I like to think of this kingdom as God’s dream for the continuing creation, a dream in which chaos is forcible displaced by habits of goodness, mercy, and love. Those habits form a structure which can be secure and trustworthy and encourage the growth of God’s bold intentions. God’s portfolio. In this particular parable we are shown a contrast between those who want to build the great allegorical temple and those who don’t. On the one hand, there are those who discern God’s intentions and match them with efforts of their own, those ones who wish to help expand God’s portfolio, help develop God’s dream,

even by taking appropriate risks against failure or personal loss. Others, whether because of fear, cowardice, disinterest, or even laziness, choose not to participate, to let God go it alone without their help. And God would be understandably disappointed...maybe even ticked-off.

Those who participate, says Jesus, are praised for their trustworthiness, for their devotion to God's dream, and receive an invitation to 'enter into the joy' of the master. Because of the interest they have demonstrated, they have the opportunity to be a part of the dream. This, I think, is less a reward than a consequence of their loyalty and devotion to the evolving portfolio. Like God, and with similar intentions, they, too, have invested in the triumph of love over chaos. They have not remained on the sidelines while there is still time on the clock. So, they will enjoy the victory when it will surely come, and will have earned not so much a reward, but added authority, responsibility, respect, and trust. 'I will put you in charge of many things' says the master, and you will grow along with the company, the team, the creation. Enter into the joy. But there is potentially a different outcome, says Jesus, for those who do not participate in the growth of the dream. Their consequence, in fact, is to be separated from the light and optimism of the dream, the kingdom, and to be on the outside looking in. From the cold darkness of the alley, they may peer into the warm glow of the café, or the busy shop, and see what they are missing. In their grief, they might grind their teeth and wail with frustration as they realize that their choice to do nothing has left them alone, envious, and miserable.

Jesus tells this parable, all parables, to enlighten, not condemn. His instruction is meant to teach a better way, not to pronounce failure. What we have here, Jesus implies, is a failure to communicate! The so-called 'lazy slave' has misunderstood the master altogether. He thinks the master is a harsh man, who reaps where he hasn't sown and gathers where he has not planted. Well, that just isn't true! All things come of thee, O Lord. All blessings are seeds you have scattered. All the harvest is because of your initial investment offering. But the poor slave just hasn't paid attention to the holy economics, and his ignorance has led him to foolishness. He has not grasped the benevolence of the master, does not know who he really is. And that leads to his peril and condemns him to be an outsider of the kingdom. His intentions may have been okay, but not discerning the master's intentions has caused him to fail. But Jesus tells this story to avoid failure, and a key part of the message it exposes is, allegorically, our miss-reading of God and the hopes God has for the great dream. Jesus is teaching about the kingdom which is coming near and about the true nature of the God who has begun the work.

God is love, and lovingly hopes to share the authority and responsibility of creation with us. God creates blessings and hopes we will use them for good. As we often read in the Old Testament prophets, God is not impressed by our sacrifices, really doesn't care to hear us recite them again and again as if they somehow made us worthy. God, implies Jesus, wants our help in growing the portfolio and making the dream come true, that we may all join in the joy God himself finds in the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen