

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
November 13, 2011

WE ARE MADE FOR THESE TIMES

I've been thinking so much these days – I suspect some of you have too – about the abuse of power, accountability and responsibility. Whether it's Penn State, Wall Street, Congress – whatever – it's unavoidable unless you are asleep. Non-stop news headlines, Facebook posts, CNN, ESPN broadcasts, political analysis and conversations by the proverbial water coolers in our lives have contributed to my continual musing of course – you just can't escape it. And I suspect – in fact I know - there are other less publicized versions of these kinds of abuses and misuses, personal and collective, that don't get that kind of exposure or air time. And while this, yes, can cause despair, as someone reminded me this week: "I do not keep a chair for it; I will not entertain it. It is not allowed to eat from my plate."

Thursday evening I was invited to speak on a panel about my vocation as a clergywoman, an Episcopal priest, a university chaplain, to both current and prospective seminary students at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, the place where I received my divinity degree and training.

My preparation for this event gave me an opportunity to reflect on my own vocation more deeply. After 11 years as a member of the clergy – which isn't such a long time really – it does give one an interesting vantage point. It has given me the chance to see both the extraordinary gifts and the stunning weaknesses of people and institutions from both afar, and up close and personal. It's a peculiar and profound vocation all at the same time. It often takes my breath away in fact. There are days that I love it, and other days not so much. It is a mixture of delight and disappointment in all of its manifestations. It is a story of talents and tyrants over and over again. Needless to say, it's sometimes weird, it's often wonderful and I can't imagine doing anything else.

The gospel reading you just heard – otherwise known as a parable – is about a wealthy man who distributes his property to 3 servants before he goes away on a long journey. The first two basically take the money to market; wealth management firms in contemporary speak if you will - and invest in high-risk ventures. The classic interpretation or reading of this story is the importance of growing talents or gifts entrusted to us with fruitfulness as the goal. And the third servant, the one-talent steward, demonstrates an apparent failure of faith as well as fruit bearing when a hole is dug and all the money is put into the ground. This classic interpretation has hooked people for a long time: work hard, invest your talents and get the blessing. That is what it means to live faithfully or productively. But if you opt out, live in fear and self-protection, you'll lose even more. Not only that, you will weep and gnash your teeth. It sounds so simple, so obvious.

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Some of the commentaries and writers I consulted this week helped me consider a second interpretation or reading of this parable – a contrast that reveals more about tyrants than talents. I'm grateful for this because I think it is quite timely and sorely needed given the circumstances and issues that permeate our lives and nation in particular these days. In this case, the emphasis turns to the master, the one with the wealth, the one with the accumulated power. His illegal gain (reaping what he did not sow) is named for what it is and his ruthless, demanding greed (gathering where he did not scatter seed) is exposed by the servant who does not want to be co-opted. This particular reading, according to one of my sources, asks whose voices matter in a world rife with power abuse. If we focus on the accountability of the master, we see him exposed in his corruption even though he has been powerful and successful. Meanwhile, the bold words of the one talent servant result in a public accountability that's not specified within the parable but perhaps implied by Jesus' teaching. In this case, living faithfully means naming the reality of abusive power or standing with one who is not cowering but bold and ready to suffer the consequences of being bold.

Whenever I have an opportunity as I did this past week to reflect and offer some perspective about why I do what I do as a member of the clergy, it gives me great pause. I realize that I'm privileged to stand by with people – in my case students, faculty, alumni and staff, you, at this remarkable university – and encourage them to be steadfast, courageous, bold in their own right whether in the classroom, in public debates, in complicated relationships, in their own religious community, in workplace politics and even in moments when confrontation is not only necessary, but required. All of this means that I stand by to encourage the people that I am called to serve vocationally to not give up hope or to lose heart for these are precisely the times, the moments for which we've been made.

A couple of weeks ago I was given and profoundly impacted by a piece written by Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, an author, poet, and post-trauma specialist. She has worked extensively with veterans and soldiers, 9/11 survivors and many others impacted gravely by significant violence and other traumas. I wanted to share a portion of it with you for its remarkable clarity, incisiveness and boldness in its own right.

Dr. Estes wrote: "I have heard from so many recently who are deeply and properly bewildered. They are concerned about the state of affairs in our world right now. Ours is a time of daily astonishment and often-righteous rage over the latest degradations of what matters most to civilized, visionary people. You are right in your assessments. The luster and hubris some have aspired to while endorsing acts so heinous against children, elders, everyday people, the poor, the unguarded, the helpless, is breathtaking. Yet, I urge you, gentle you, to please not spend your spirit dry by bewailing these difficult times. Especially do not lose hope. Most particularly because, the fact is that we were made for these times. Yes. For years, we have been

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learning, practicing, been in training for and just waiting to meet on this exact plain of engagement.”

She goes on to use the imagery and metaphor of a seaworthy vessel as analogous to awakened souls. Souls like you and me. She contends that there have never been more able vessels in the waters than there are right now across the world. And that we are fully provisioned and able to signal one another as never before in the history of humankind. Look out over the prow she says. There are millions of boats of righteous souls on the waters with you. And the long timbers composing our prow and rudder come from a greater forest. It is a long grained lumber known to withstand storms, to hold together, to hold its own, and to advance, regardless.

“Ours is not the task of fixing the entire world all at once, but of stretching out to mend the part of the world that is within our reach. It is not given to us to know which acts or by whom, will cause the critical mass to tip toward an enduring good. What is needed is an accumulation of acts, adding, adding to, adding more, continuing.”

What I recognize that has been on my mind so much these days is how to continue to be someone who stands with you and others not only as a priest and a pastor, but also as an awakened soul who is a believer, who has pledged my life to a voice greater and continually asks for the accumulation of grace, good words, good deeds and bold determination.

Either way we read this particular parable today – classic or otherwise - both emphasize accountability, responsibility - and call out the squandering of talent because of a tyrant. In one example we could say the tyrant is fear, for burying even one talent squanders opportunity. In the other case, a master who accumulates and abuses power squanders the very potential and freedom of a good steward.

But as I have been reminded by Dr. Estes and many others, by the tenacity and courage of those whom I am privileged to stand with and by on this campus, by those who are at the crux of discerning their own vocations and purpose, and by my own trust in a great and mysterious God – I find immense strength to confront tyrants without being one or falling prey to one. The kingdom, the reign of rightly ordered power that is near to us in the life and example of one named Christ is free from tyranny and ultimately directs us to more life, more full and abundant. It is a vision of human flourishing that neither the fearful servant nor the master was able to experience. Whether this news unburies a talent or gives us our voice – it is a needed and transforming witness in these shadowy times.

Dr. Estes reminded me that one of the most calming and powerful actions we can do to intervene in a stormy world is to stand up and show our soul. The light of a soul throws sparks, can send up flares, builds signal fires, causes proper matters to catch

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fire. To display the lantern of our souls in times like these – to be fierce and to show mercy toward others, both, are acts of immense bravery and greatest necessity. Struggling souls catch light from other souls who are fully lit and willing to show it.

Her powerful essay concluded this way: “The good words and the good deeds we do are not ours: they are the words and deeds of the One who brought us here. In that spirit, I hope you will write this on your wall: When a great ship is in harbor and moored, it is safe, there can be no doubt. But that is not what great ships are built for. This comes with much love and a prayer that you remember who you came from, and why you came to this beautiful, needful Earth.”

Indeed, we are made for these times.

Amen.

Notes:

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *Temple of Solace, We Were Made For These Times*, 2011.