

Sermon for Sunday, November 19, 2017
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

According to tradition
there are seven deadly sins:
pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth.
Pride, excessive belief in your own abilities;
envy, the desire for others' traits, status, abilities, or situation;
gluttony, a consuming desire to eat more than we need;
lust, an inordinate craving for the pleasures of the body;
anger, opting for fury rather than love and forgiveness;
greed is the desire for material wealth or gain;
and sloth, the avoidance of physical or spiritual work.
For hundreds of years, they were the benchmark
for what constituted sin, what required repentance, the opposite of
a holy and godly life, and all of us, I suspect,
struggle with at least one of them
in our ordinary lives.

But as I read the readings for today,
I wonder if there isn't one missing
from the list. And that one
is complacency.

Complacency kind of overlaps with some of the other sins, but it's not exactly the same.
It can have a bit of sloth in it, the unwillingness to do work, but that's not always true.
Sometimes complacency involves working, but working at kind of half throttle, coasting
along at a comfortable level but never going hard enough to stand out.

And complacency can have a bit of pride in it, that kind of self delusion that says you're
doing fine and no one can complain because after all, you're getting the job done — even
though the work may only be mediocre.

Complacency is that habit
of settling for less than the best, that aura of self-satisfaction
that everything is fine as it is, no need for change. And there complacency
has an edge of fear, fear that if something does changes, everything
will be lost.

And of course, the textbook danger for those of us who tend to become complacent
is that one day
we will wake up from our contented stupor and discover that everything

has changed.

That in our complacency, we have ignored what is going on around us, and have been left behind.

One of the way that people talk about churches is about those that function in a maintenance mode, versus churches which function in a mission mode.

Maintenance mode

is when a church settles for simply reproducing themselves in their own likeness. When people work hard to make everything stay the same as it has always been. Maintenance mode is when all our energy is used up just in surviving, where we keep doing what we have always done because that is the way we have always done it.

Maintenance mode

is not just found in small, struggling churches — it can be found anywhere where people are content to settle for the status quo, where complacency is the dominant attitude.

At the other end of the spectrum

is mission mode. Mission mode

is when the church as a whole

looks outwards, when the church searches for God's leading in new ways and directions. Mission mode

is when a church looks at the changing community around it, and tries to adapt, to change, to reach out to those people with the gospel and love of Christ.

Mission mode

is risky, it can even be dangerous, because it's part of its very nature to try the untested.

If maintenance mode

is characterized by complacency, mission mode

is characterized by passion.

You may be wondering by now

what on earth this all has to do with our readings today.

So let's go back to the story

Jesus told,

the story

which is commonly called

the parable
of the talents.

Once there was a man, going on a journey. He needed someone to look after his business for him, so he called three slaves. To the first he gave five talents – not talents meaning things you're good at, but a measure of value – a talent was about 15 to 20 years' worth of average wages, so in today's terms, he gave the first slave something in the realm of 3 million dollars. To the second slave, he gave a little less, two talents, something a little over a million. And to the third, he gave even less, one talent, around half a million. Still a lot of money.

The first slave took his 3 million, and played the stock market — which was obviously doing a lot better than it is now — and doubled his money. The second did the same and he doubled his money as well.

But the third one, he was a bit scared of having all this money in his hands. So he went, dug a hole, and hid it safely away, where no one could touch it, no one could steal it. When the man came back, he called his servants to him, and asked what had happened to the money. The first two came with their great earnings reports, and were rewarded with even greater amounts to take care of.

The third one, when he heard the man had returned, went out into his back yard and carefully dug up the money, and brought it to the man, expecting to be congratulated.

After all, he had kept safe

what he had been given. He had preserved it intact, no risks, no losses.

But instead of being congratulated

he is condemned,

condemned, it seems to me, for being complacent. You see, he had thought

that if he just kept what he had been given

in exactly the condition

it was given to him, if he effectively

suspended time,

that he would have done the right thing.

No doubt he looked at the other slaves, with their high risk investments and uncertain dividends, and congratulated himself on taking the prudent, the safe investment strategy.

But he was wrong. You see, every thing he did

was based on the fallacy

that he was given the money

to keep,

rather than

to use.

Jesus is talking about the end times, he is talking about how Christians are to behave while we wait for the day of the Lord, the return of Christ, the end of the world as we know it. And his story connects with our story on at least two different levels.

The first

is on a personal level.

Each and every one of us is, according to Scripture, given gifts. Not only tangible things, like the money in Jesus' story, though that's an important part of the gifts God gives us, but other gifts too. Some of us are gifted singers. Some of us are gardeners. Some of us are good at looking after money and financial stuff. Others are gifted readers. Some have a gift of hospitality, some of administration. Some of befriending children; some of befriending the sick or elderly. Some can cook, some have a passion for prayer; some write; some preach. Each and every one of these gifts, whether it is kind of ordinary or really spectacular, is given by God

for the good of this community.

And if we take this story of Jesus's, each of us is to use our gifts in the service of God, not holding on to them protectively, until some later time, but offering them now, as best we can. It's risky business, but unlike the stock market, safety is not in being complacent or conservative, but in taking risks for the sake of the one who risked everything for us.

And the second way this story connects with our story is on the level of our parish.

We have, as a parish, and as the people of God in this place, been given many gifts by God. Some of those have been given to us through the hard labor of people here in St James over the last century and a half — our beautiful building is the prime example of that. But there are other, less tangible gifts. Things like the ongoing witness of people to Christ in this place, the people who decided back 164 years ago that it was important to have a place here in St James to worship. People who taught our children, and worked on the Altar Guild, and raised money, and prayed, who have kept this place alive as a vibrant witness to the gospel of Christ and the love of God here in this part of Long Island. I imagine that at the time, it was not always easy. But we are able to worship here now because of their good stewardship of the gifts they were given.

And its our turn now. God has entrusted to us these many gifts, and its up to us how we use them, wisely or otherwise. We have a certain responsibility to take care of our heritage, our buildings, our traditions. But God has given us this place not simply to keep, but to use, in God's service.

Many of you know by now that we're coming to the end of our annual stewardship campaign . We've heard parishioners talk about their own experiences of God in this place, and their call to serve; we've talked about money and and we've talked about pledging.

Because what we do with the gifts that God has given us are what makes our church function. It's what allows us to serve God and the people of God in this place. So that not only we, but the whole of our community can discover who our God is, and what a difference God can make in their lives too.

That's what it means to be a church that is focussed on mission, rather than just maintenance. Not being content simply to stay where we are, to preserve what has always been, but instead, as good stewards of the gifts God has given us, learning a new way of being, a risky one, but its not the sort of risk you take in the stock market. This risk is underwritten by something far greater than even the Federal Reserve. It's underwritten by God, God who created all the world and us as well. And God will come, if Jesus' story is anything to go by, and check up on how we are using our gifts, and if we are using them well, will give us far more than we could ever have imagined, and God will come in the day of judgement and look at our gifts, and will say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servants. Come and join the feast."