

“Well Done. Good and Faithful Servant”

Sunday, November 16, 2014

I

Etty Hillesum was a young, talented, Dutch-Jewish woman who became a prisoner in a Nazi transit camp where she worked very hard to comfort her fellow prisoners before being transported to Auschwitz herself -- finally murdered there in 1943. And like Anne Frank, Etty's diary was salvaged and her writing from 1941 to her death is published in a volume titled *An Interrupted Life*.

While still in Holland, she wrote: “They keep telling me that someone like me has a duty to go into hiding, because I have so many things to do in life, so much to give. But I know that whatever I may have to give to others, I can give it, no matter where I am, here in the circle of my friends or over there, in a concentration camp.”

And give she did. Until she was killed.

Now you may be wondering what this has to do with any of the readings this morning – especially that Gospel. So, let's turn to this scary parable in Matthew – I guess there's no way out of it -- and try to see truth beneath the story.

II

OK. Matthew in his wisdom has placed this end-times, shocking judgment story after two other scenes that speak of God's generous mercy – the one about the gracious King who totally forgives the enormous debt of a slave who owes him money. And of course expects the slave to go and do likewise. And the other scene before today's is about that rich guy who hires workers for his vineyard and insists on showering all of them – early workers and latecomers alike – showering all with ample reward – even those latecomers who didn't really deserve a full day's wage.

So I expect that Jesus' listeners – as He told today's story – I imagine they expected another feel-good scene about a generous King. But they got a warning shock instead – like a cup of cold water splashed in their faces. And I imagine it got their attention. Now to tell you the truth, I've always sort-of felt sorry for the one-talent guy. I mean, he's afraid. Now ... maybe he's just not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Or maybe he's just discouraged ... defeatist from the get-go ... doesn't see the point in even trying.

In any case, whatever the reason, he takes the money, this talent, digs a hole, and buries it. Doesn't steal it. Doesn't spend it. Simply chooses not to risk it, in hopes of making more wealth – as his friends had done. And then he crouches in fear.

Well, we heard what happened to him. I mean no point in rehashing the fact that the Master makes it very clear that simply holding onto what he has in his possession is not good enough. Not good enough indeed!!

Now. I think on first reading, this is a scary, metaphoric story of God's final judgment. And I also think that's probably why Matthew waited until the end of his Gospel to paint this picture. I mean, the story's not intended for folks who've not heard the other two before it. It's not intended for folks who've not seen the amazing mercy and compassion of God lived out in the story of Jesus' whole life ... and death for the sake of others.

No, this story is for those of us who have paid attention – for those of us who have decided that the life of a believer is the path we hope to walk. So no, it's meant for you and me who've already – I suspect ... at one level or another – have already felt the mercy of God.

But now Matthew confronts us with this truth: This is the other side of the coin ... the other side of the generous gift ... so to speak. That accepting the Gospel -- the Good News of Jesus – means obligation as well as absolution. Means work as well as peace. Means action as well as acceptance.

So gifts. What do you and I have that we've been gifted with? Well let's think. Obviously skills, but also insights, minds, bodies, interests, specialties, and yes, money – in fact, when you get right down to it ... your very life is an undeserved gift – and in the end, not really yours to cling to. I mean apparently all these gifts are not a birthright. Not ... a right that you have. No, they're a trust – a trust given to you by the One who's created you. And that One, as Matthew's story so clearly shows, expects – no, actually demands – a return on that investment.

See, I think you and I are not faithful Christians 'cause of what we believe. We are not faithful Christians because of where we worship. We are Christians because of Who we serve. And we show that service through our actions.

Now. Right about here, it might be tempting to dwell on the ominous ending of today's story. You know, the old fire and brimstone approach. I mean, fear is a great motivator, isn't it? No doubt about it! Scare the living daylights out of you and this gets your attention.

But here's the problem with that. See, fear was what paralyzed that third slave in our story. Fear froze him into a crouch as he buried the money. Filled him with dread at the day of reckoning. He was afraid. But Scripture reminds you and me that we are not heirs of slavery and fear; we are children claimed by God.

So rather than ask, "OK, what have I been given?" ... I mean, most of us I guess know what our own special gifts and talents are. So I think the question isn't, "What do I have that I can contribute?" but, "What's stopping me?" "What am I afraid of?"

See, maybe the main truth from Matthew's story this morning is that God expects ... to do something with you. So even if you're sitting here this morning feeling kind-of worthless, kind of broken, I think you can hear this story and take heart. 'Cause God trusts you enough to bring you here. God trusts you enough to make you a part of a sometimes broken body of believers. And in return God expects you ... God expects you to try.

But if – on the other hand – you already have a strong ego (as they say) – a strong sense of your own self worth ... high self-esteem ... then let this scene do its little job of shaking you up a bit. Maybe God expects ... more of you than you thought.

In any case, Matthew's story says there will be a day of reckoning – a day of reckoning that might go something like this. Did you or did you not go to visit that lonely old lady who lives down the street? Did you or did you not offer that guy slumped on the corner of Broad Street something to eat? Did you or did you not befriend that guy in the neighborhood who doesn't know a soul? Or have a single friend?

See, there's a reason why one of the seven deadly sins is called acedia – meaning basically, "I don't care ... I just don't care." Deadly. So again, back to fear. What are you afraid of? What holds you back? Well, let's come at this question from a different slant. Let's try this. Food for thought.

Maybe what's absent when fear is present is grace-filled gratitude for God's gifts – starting with life itself. For all that you have. For all that you are. And then, like Etty Hillesum, make a different choice. Choose courage. Courage ... which I happen to think is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to risk giving to others in spite of it. Chose courage to risk investing your gifts over and over again, every day that you live – if real living is what you're after. Over and over. A new way of life.

III

Someone once wrote: "Night is drawing nigh. For all that has been – thanks! To all that shall be – Yes." So ... gratitude for all that's past ... and thankful trust in what's to come – gratitude for the givenness of your very life. See, I think grateful giving is the stuff of God's Presence – an expansive opening onto the Divine ... through loving others ... expanding to God. Expansive!

Empowered by ... Grace. Grace! God's self-giving to humans, and ... face it ... grace often disturbs – shakes up – our human arrangements, doesn't it? Calling forth ... inviting a response on your part. A response like what? Well, ordinary kindness, encouragement of others, taking someone else's part ... maybe when it's against your own interest to do so, making a decision 'cause you're simply convinced of someone's worth. Opening up to that stranger ... making your world a different place.

And how about this! Here's an amazing thing! Just amazing!! I think grace includes loving ... even when it's painful – grateful even in hardship, even in sorrow ... in grief ... freely and profoundly grateful, amazing! ... Awesome as it can seem to others who have not yet traveled that distance.

Circling back to Etty Hillisum, shortly before she was transported to Auschwitz, knowing full well that she would soon die there, she wrote to a friend the following prayer: "You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out your beauty with open hands. My life has become an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue. Sometimes, God, when I stand in some corner of the prison camp, my feet planted on your earth, my eyes raised toward your heaven, tears sometimes run down my face, tears of deep emotion ... gratitude. At night, Lord, when I lie in my bed and rest in You, oh God, tears of gratitude run down my face, and that is my prayer ..."

Finally, in Matthew's end-time story this morning, Jesus calls you and me to live with the intensity of last days – who knows when yours or my last day will be – He calls you to live into the Last Days while living your daily life ... reminding you that you are not ultimately invested in this world, freeing you up to work with courage, with hope.

Yes, End times call for tall towers of hope – for a radical shift, a reordering of your priorities. End times are powerful times pregnant with purpose for those with ears to hear and eyes to see the advent of God.

Let me close with the last glimpse we have of Etty's life. An eyewitness to her deportation to Auschwitz wrote the following: "And there she stepped onto the platform ... talking gaily, smiling, a kind word for everyone she met on the way, full of sparkling humor, perhaps just a touch of sadness, but every inch the Etty you all know so well.

"I heard her say, 'I have my diaries, my little Bible, my Russian grammar and Tolstoy with me and God knows what else,'" He writes. "Etty finished up in Car No. 12, having first stopped to look for a friend in Car No. 14 who was pulled out again at the last moment. Then a shrill whistle and the 1,000 prisoners were moving out. Another flourish from Etty's brother Mischa, who waved through a crack in Car No. 1, a cheerful 'bye' from Etty in No. 12 and they were gone.

"She is gone. We stand bereft, but not with empty hands. We shall find each other soon enough."

Etty Hillesum died in Auschwitz on November 30, 1943, at the age of 29. Well done ... good and faithful servant.

Amen.

1. Resources used: *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-43* (English translation copyright 1983 by Jonathan Cape Ltd.), New York: Simon and Shuster (Washington Square Press

Publication), 1985; The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock "When He Shall Come"; Margaret Visser's The Gift of Thanks. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009; Lectionary Homiletics for November 16.