

November 16 – 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31 ♦ Psalms 128:1-2, 3, 4-5 ♦
First Thessalonians 5:1-6 ♦ Matthew 25:14-30 or 25:14-15, 19-20

I always thought this gospel was unfair. After all, the third servant gave back what the master gave him. He received significantly less than the others, and, afraid to lose the little he got, he guaranteed that he could return it unscathed. He didn't do any harm to the master or the money.

Except that Jesus is giving a very strong and clear message to his disciples: God calls us to do more than the minimum. As Christians, our lives cannot stop at "do no harm," but rather, we must do good. It's not enough to bury our "talents" and not risk losing them: We must use our talents so that they multiply.

As a Maryknoll lay missionary, I work in São Paulo, Brazil, with women in prison. My job is to visit them, accompany them, pray with them, and to defend their rights as citizens and as human beings, while they await trial or complete their sentences.

I visit with women accused of or sentenced for violent crimes; many, many women who are dealing with a drug addiction problem; who have shoplifted diapers, or shampoo or food; and women who managed to make bad choices in boyfriends.

Statistics show that over 90 percent of women in prison in Brazil have been victims of violence at some point in their lives, as children, as spouses and girlfriends, or at the hands of the police at the moment of their arrest. Their lives have been difficult and painful at points. And yet, among them, are prophets, holy people, women who are sick or just lost, and a lot of ordinary people who have made some terrible decisions in their lives.

A Catholic social movement here called the prison pastoral accompanies those in prison, their families and those who work with them, and works for justice and for a better world as well. Most of the pastoral agents are volunteers who have full lives with work, families and other commitments, but make time each week to care for their brothers and sisters.

These people choose to do more than the minimum with their time and their care. They take their talents and invest them in humanity. As the reading from Thessalonians reminds us, we are all "children of the light and children of the day." We are not of the night or of darkness, and we must stay "alert and sober." The symbolism here is to remind us that we must be prepared at all times, and not sleeping, waiting for life to happen. Like the volunteers in the prisons, we must go out of our own lives and routines and live in the light, and build the reign of God.

In the gospel, the last servant didn't do anything legally wrong - he just did nothing technically right! Many times people in prison say, "But I'm innocent. I didn't rob the store - my boyfriend did. I just sat in the car. Why was I sentenced?" I wonder - did that person try to dissuade her boyfriend from the crime or the violence? Or did she just not participate in the crime? "Do no harm" is a slippery slope. Sometimes not acting on behalf of justice is not just an omission, but is in fact, a participation in the violence.

A story of a judge who chooses to do the minimum required of him is a good illustration of this gospel. Iolanda was 79 year old woman dying of cancer. She had a colostomy bag which she had to hold when she walked because her intestines would begin to come out the incision in

her belly. She had never been arrested before the day that the police picked her up with her son in their house, accused of selling drugs.

Was Iolanda selling drugs? No one will ever know, but did she need to be locked up in a prison? Absolutely not! The prisons have no facilities adequate for someone in her fragile state of health. She lived in the infirmary where she watched the rats play on the floor at night. She never saw the prison's doctor.

Her release was requested by the Catholic prison pastoral – so that she could go home on bail – where her family could take care of her and take her to court for her hearings. Even the prosecuting attorney agreed, which is extremely rare in a drug-related case. The judge refused. The request was reiterated with more support from other organizations – again supported by the prosecutor – and still the judge refused.

Was the judge legally wrong to refuse to let a terminally ill, old woman be released on bail? No. He was within the law. Was he morally wrong? Jesus would say “yes.” Like the master who expected more from his servants, returning the minimum is not enough. Following the law to a bare minimum is not enough.

Evaluating the case, considering what Jesus might do, remember after almost 80 years of life, this was her first arrest and she was still technically “innocent until proven guilty.” Jesus would evaluate the judge. Did the judge use his talents in service of the people, including the people who stand before him accused of crimes? Or, like the third servant who made his decision based upon what he thought of the master, did the judge resort to flash judgments about others (like Iolanda) and not even consider what would be the best, most life-giving response to the situation?

Fortunately, an appeals judge signed Iolanda's release, and she went home after months in prison, and spent her last few months of life with her family.

Who are we in relation to this gospel, and in relation to the stories above? Are we the girlfriend, who neither participated nor impeded the crime committed? We can choose to react out of fear and judgment and bury our talents, or we can choose to act with our lives, to be proactive and take risks.

Do we want to be the first or second servant, who took what he had, invested it and used it to increase its value? Like the volunteers who visit the prisons, who give their time freely each week helping their brothers and sisters, standing up to judges and defending Life with a capital “L,” who grow far richer for the relationships they develop and the wisdom they gain?

Or would we rather be like the judge- who ignores the advice of even his trusted prosecuting attorney – and stubbornly clings to his right to maintain Iolanda in prison, who does the bare minimum required by the law and never considers the human being involved?

Do I vote in elections and consider my civic duties complete, or do I participate in local organizations in order to be a part of the creation of a more just world and society?

It's not enough to just take care of my portion: Jesus calls us to risk our talents, to risk what we have been given and to give back more. The talents are not mine to begin with but have been given to me. As Christians, we are called to receive these gifts and invest them, and in investing them, they grow and we return to God the riches that God has given us and more.

“Do no harm” is not a Christian theme and is not what God calls us to in this life. Let us be of the light and let us courageously risk all for love, knowing that in the reign of God, all of this and more will come back to us.