

Readings

Prv 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31

Ps 128:1-2, 3, 4-5

1 Thes 5:1-6

Mt 25:14-30

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Some years back, I spent some time as a student in Chicago. One day, walking home from class, I stopped in the Barnes and Noble on East 53rd St. The security gent at the door greeted me, and answered my question as to whether I should check my book bag. Not necessary. On my way out, he was speaking to three teenage boys. As I pushed on the door, he excused himself from the kids and called to me, *Don't you know me?* I didn't know him and have never lived in Chicago. So I said, *I don't think so.* Answered he, smiling, *Yes, you do – come back here and talk to me.* I did, expecting to straighten out the mistake and continue on my way. Next thing you know, he's introducing me to the three young men, certain I am one of his high school teachers. They each politely shake my hand. Now, I don't want to embarrass him in front of the others. I'm also wondering if I knew him maybe in one of the parishes where I worked with Latino and African American people. Still I couldn't place him.

To make a long story short, he finished high school 15 years back. He says he's now a Chicago police officer, married, with a son (12) and a daughter (15). B&N is his second job. He needs some serious help being tutored, apparently to help his children with homework. The son is struggling with English, and his dad "missed" a lot of what I taught in class and forgot the rest. Now I know which subject I taught (Junior year).

The boys move on and he continues briefly in the same certain and sincere way, calling me Schultz every now and then. Now I know who I am. He asks in what school I'm teaching now and I gave an evasive answer. He reminds me how I'd stand with the students after class and shoot the breeze with them. He wants me to take his phone number and call him later about tutoring. As he searches his pockets for pen and paper (I wasn't about to help him here), two plainclothes police officers enter the store – jackets unzipped and badges visible around their necks. They all recognize each other and say hello. One of them loans him a pen. Now he introduces me to them as Schultz, his teacher from high school. They greet me politely and shake my hand. Says one, *Always good to see a high school teacher*. The other asks, *Which school?* Looking at my new friend who has found the receipt from his lunch to write his phone number on, and thinking fast, I say, *Oh, his school*. Turns out he attended Near North Public HS which he verifies for the cop.

The police move on. I have this man's number, literally and figuratively, and I'm smiling and trying hard not to burst out laughing. We shake hands. I make my exit. *Hey, be sure to call me, will ya, Schultz?*

I know this sounds like a TV sitcom episode, but it's absolutely true. Too bad both Ray Romano's and Jerry Seinfeld's shows have finished their runs.

As you know, we are now in the last few weeks of this liturgical year. Advent will be upon us shortly. Our time on earth is short. The scriptures call us to look more deeply at the brief span of our years here below, and the quality of living and service to others we offer. Yet the ads in the Sunday newspapers and the stores ready for Christmas at Halloween urge us, "Yes, the time is very short, so shop now." We are pulled in at least two directions. The readings encourage

our pondering our future in eternity and how we're doing at living well. The present world wants to lure us elsewhere.

The first reading comes at the end of the book of Proverbs. The author now attributes to a good wife all virtues that, at the beginning of the book, were extolled as characteristics of Lady Wisdom. Not only that, the description neatly follows the Hebrew alphabet in order (say those who can read the original text). Today, we do not limit our understanding of the text to just the words on the page.

The reading describes one who is faithful and true, who uses their skills, talents, and time well. One who thinks of the needs of others, not just their immediate circle, and reaches out to them as well as they are able. A person like this is a valuable prize and worth more than anything to which we can compare them. Sincerity, honesty, one's best effort, generous behavior, making the effort to go beyond ourselves, genuine goodness – these are all glowing examples of what we humans can be. We find this in ourselves when disaster strikes, but what of the rest of our time? A wife, a husband, a worker or student, a friend who gives their best is a real treasure and will be honored for their effort one day. We are called to be all we are able, and this is how we'll be measured one day.

We are reminded of life's brevity by the constant wheel of natural disasters and suicide bombings and brutal attacks, the wheel that turns on every news program and in every paper and all across the internet. Maybe we are even overwhelmed by all the requests for assistance. Still, we need to be reminded of just how blessed we are. We can and need to offer to others of ourselves in time and talent, not just our earthly treasures. Just to be really present to our loved ones these days is a precious commodity. What with all the needs and distractions, clutter and

obligations of our society and world, real attention to those who need it most is our precious gem.

St. Paul reminds us death can be swift and silent, upon us in an instant. The loved ones of all those lost unexpectedly in dangerous storms, earthquakes, and suicide blasts know this too well. Jesus adds another theme in the Gospel reading. Yes, we have been lavishly blessed in faith, abilities, and gifts beyond measure. The real challenge is how well we use and serve with all we have been given. We (of the most developed nations) who have all the privileges of plenty – food, clean water, healthcare, good education – will be held more accountable for the stewardship of our gifts than those with fewer advantages. We cannot claim ignorance. We cannot presume kindness from the estate owner or the judge. St. Augustine, in a sermon (#74) written for this Gospel, asks, “If the owner is so harsh with the one who merely failed to invest, how will it go for the one who squanders the capital?”

I lived briefly some years ago with an elderly priest. Though somewhat crippled with arthritis, he was a great preacher and a great wit. He’d always ask when I came home from some effort, *Did you do the best you could? ...Yes? then there is nothing more to say.* We both hoped that would be the only question at the last judgement. Sometimes life pitches us a slider or a change-up for which we are unprepared. I “did the best I could” with that security guard in Barnes and Noble.